

Hail Mary, Full of Grace *and* Strength

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name."
(The Song of Mary)*

On the fourth Sunday in Advent we stand on the threshold between the anticipation of God's promised fulfillment and the remembrance of its ultimate realization in the birth of Jesus, the Christ child. This year we will be visiting this event through Joseph's story, and we'll think on that together on Sunday, but I wanted to reflect on Mary this week and reclaim the true power of her story.

As Luke tells it, Mary's story is elegant, artful and we are treated to Mary's point of view. It's beautiful. It's poignant. It's musical.

Luke sets the stage in vivid scenes from the Temple to the manger. Angels fly here and there making announcements. People keep breaking out in song. Everybody speaks in poetry as though we were in an Opera.

Then at that magical, climactic moment of Jesus' birth, the heavens open and the celestial choir sings the "Gloria." It is very dramatic and in Luke's version we are also witness to an exquisite moment between two amazing women, Mary and her cousin, Elizabeth.

This deeply human moment is so fascinating and beautiful and touching. This is the gift we receive in their story, a lovely snapshot of two strong, determined women whose joy is amplified by their ability to bless one another.

We are allowed to witness their delight and belief that God does extraordinary and wonderful things even in a world where violence is ever present and it seems as though opportunity and safety is only for a select few who can afford it.

This scene is very brief, only a glimpse in the greater story, but it is just enough to show us this meeting and tell us why it was important. The

song Mary shares with Elizabeth should not be confused for a lullaby shared between pregnant women.^[1]

At the center of this song is deep prophecy about what happens when God's strength is displayed through humans acting justly; we see the promise of an end to men like Herod, or our modern, emerging modern despots, and are offered a glimpse of a world where God's justice and mercy is more prevalent than greed for power, money, and domination.

Mary's song sings of God's faithfulness to God's promises no matter what the appearance to the contrary.

We should be very careful not to sentimentalize this encounter simply because it is presented to us so beautifully. Elizabeth and Mary were both disgraced women, Elizabeth because of her years of barrenness and Mary because of her untimely pregnancy.

When Mary's spirit rejoices that God has looked with favor on his lowly servant she is not speaking of her own humility and gentleness and meekness---this is a deeply erroneous interpretation and how her story has been robbed of its substance. "Lowly" actually carries a social connotation and it means marginalized or disgraced.^[2]

But these two strong, amazing women reject society's shaming of them and instead we hear them sharing blessings for one another, singing for the promise of a whole world where God's light will penetrate the darkness.

Mary sings of a change of fortunes, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly."

Mary's song may sound like a prelude to bloodshed and revolution, but when we add God's mercy as the central factor in this reversal of fortunes we are left with a far better promise.

Through Mary God calls us as agents of transformation. If we place God's hope at the center of life and action we do not encounter vengeance or retribution. Instead, a social and political economy that is marked by scarcity and deadly competition is replaced by an economy of generosity in which *all* have enough: those who are hungry get to enjoy good things, and

^[1] Sharon Ringe, *The Gospel of Luke, Westminster Bible Companion*

^[2] Ibid.

those who are rich repent of the sin and rapacious hunger in order to *add* to their riches.

The rich are told to understand the blessing of knowing exactly what “enough” really is; to give up the need to exercise their power and domination over others which results in just a scant few having far more than they can ever use or need.

In this gloriously joyful song that bursts forth in the middle of a dark and dangerous situation for this young woman we hear the deep truth that God’s mercy is *never* divorced from God’s justice.^[3] We hear that God is faithful to God’s promises and that the world will soon know this truth in an unexpected way.

And if we think this hope and its attendant struggle is something dead we simply remember from the past or that maybe this is too great a message or reality to be borne by a young woman we only have to look at a modern parallel to know differently.

Many of you have heard of Malala Yousafzai who was 11 years old when she inadvertently became the voice for millions of Muslim girls in Pakistan and Afghanistan who want to attend school.

Her voice, her song of hope for God’s justice and mercy for the lowly of her world became a deadly threat to the brutal regimes of our own day. That a teenage girl in a male dominated, religiously fundamentalist culture could pose such a threat is astounding.

But yet here we are. We know her name, we know her story, and if we are paying attention we want to fight for her cause even though our girls already have some, but not all of the freedoms she is willing to die for. And though violent, dominating power tried to silence her song, she still lives and her song has been taken up by the whole world---she was even awarded the Nobel Peace Prize!

We are called to act, act to insure that all of God’s people from every faith and nation finally join in making God’s promises a reality for all.

Given our current times, we must now more than ever, claim the courage of women like Mary, Elizabeth, and Malala and join our voices to their powerfully hopeful songs and courageous acts; to be a people whose thirst

^[3] Ibid.

for blessing, whose desire for justice and mercy creates a song of hope all of us must hear and join.

Grace and Peace,

Stephanie+