

Women on the Verge

Luke 1:26-55

Rev. Rachel Knuth
The Community Church of Sebastopol
United Church of Christ
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I.

Good morning and Advent Blessings to you this Gaudete Sunday, when we light the pink candle of Joy! In this season of growing darkness, our Advent candles help us to remember to be the light to one another and in our world. Our Jewish friends and neighbors began Hanukkah this week—they also light candles, remembering the Maccabean uprising and retaking of the Temple in Jerusalem. This was a week when shooting stars graced our night skies, and a week when voters in Alabama, particularly African-American women voters, rejected bigotry, racism, and sexual abuse. My grandparents and parents, aunts and uncles, and many of my cousins are from Alabama. And as the sister of a queer woman living in Birmingham, I'm surprised to be saying this, but Alabama just might be another light in the darkness this Advent. Gaudete! Rejoice!

Our reading this morning includes three major scenes: the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will become pregnant; the Visitation, when Mary travels to see her cousin Elizabeth; and the Magnificat, or Mary's Song. This trio of famous scenes have been the subject of countless pieces of art, music, poetry, and sermons in the Christian tradition. As soon as Mary responds to the angel Gabriel, accepting her calling to bear the Christ-child, Mary sets out to see Elizabeth—perhaps for confirmation that God is working through them, and perhaps for moral support and sisterhood. When Mary arrives, Elizabeth says her child—John the Baptist—leaps in her womb. It is a longstanding biblical tradition, going back to Jacob and Esau arguing in Rebekah's womb before they were born— that how babies in the womb expressed themselves became how they interacted throughout their lives. So here we have a preview of John the Baptist, prophet and preparer of The Way. Mary responds to Elizabeth by singing the powerful Magnificat, "My Soul Magnifies the Lord," a radical song about the lowly being lifted up and the powerful brought down from their thrones.

The Magnificat, it turns out, is so radical that it has a long history of being banned. In the year 1199 the Catholic Bishop in Paris decreed that the Magnificat could not be read aloud in church more than five times, because it was too revolutionary. In 1805

an Anglican missionary to Calcutta, India—which was under British rule— was shocked to find that the British viceroys had banned the Magnificat from being read at evening worship. Years later, on the last day of colonial rule, Gandhi defiantly requested that the Magnificat be read aloud as the British flags were being lowered. German theologian and anti-Nazi activist Dietrich Bonhoeffer included the Magnificat in his Christmas sermon in 1933, saying, “The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is the most passionate, most vehement, one might say most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung.” In the 1970s in Argentina, mothers whose children had been “disappeared” during the Dirty War—the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo—these mothers wrote the words of the Magnificat on posters throughout the capital plaza. The military junta responded by outlawing any public display of the Magnificat. Mary’s Song has been the song of oppressed people throughout history.

II.

The problem is that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right, 84 years ago in Germany, when he said that the Magnificat “is not the gentle, sweet, dreamy Mary that we so often see portrayed in pictures, but the passionate, powerful, proud, enthusiastic Mary, who speaks here.” If you look at how Mary has been presented in art over time, you see that she has been everything from a regal, enthroned, Queen of Heaven to a peasant girl, to a mother playing with her chubby baby. Paintings of the Annunciation often show Mary cowering or hiding her eyes and looking small next to the angel Gabriel. She’s almost always portrayed as submissive, devoted and pure— both the perfect mother and the perfect virgin. Which is problematic because it’s been set forth as an impossible standard for all other women, who necessarily fall short of this ideal. So how can we sift through the layers of thousands of years of interpretation and find the true Mary? Well, maybe we can’t really— we are products of our own culture, our own time and place, just like all the interpreters who have gone before us. But perhaps going back to the biblical text will allow us to see this famous story with fresh eyes. In our children’s Godly Play program we say that we keep returning to the same stories again and again, knowing that they may open to us in new ways each time we approach them.

III.

Imagine with me, that you are a sculptor. You might want to close your eyes for this. Imagine that you are standing in front of an uncarved block of marble. You’re going to make a statue of Mary. Take a moment and think about how you’re going to portray her. Consider her posture, where her eyes would be looking, what colors you’d use. (pause) Okay, you can open your eyes. If you are like most artists through the centuries, you would have carved a docile young woman in robes— and if you painted your sculpture, her cloak would be blue— and the palms of her hands

turned up. There's a certain mythology about Mary, right? But today we have an opportunity to claim (or reclaim) Mary as strong and capable, someone who could be seen as a prophet, one who bravely took a difficult path to do the work of God in the world.

So let's take a closer look at Mary as she's presented in today's Gospel. Is Mary really terrified by the angel Gabriel, and does she therefore strike a submissive pose in response to him, meekly acquiescing to his request? Luke says that the angel Gabriel tells her not to be afraid. We can read into the story that the angel wouldn't be telling her not to be afraid unless she was actually afraid. But this does not make Mary meek and submissive; rather, it places her in good company with plenty of men who have been terrified by angels. Gideon, Jacob, Jonah, Zechariah, the Shepherds of Bethlehem— they all were afraid when angels visited them. Gideon even had to be told, "do not fear, you will not die" when he encountered an angel. Mary is perplexed, and she asks clarifying questions— how can this be?— and after she has gathered enough information from this angelic visitor, she decides for herself, yes. She accepts the call to bear the Christ-child. She maintains her own agency in the situation— this is not the posture of a quietly obedient girl, but of a strong-minded young woman who makes her own decision. It matters how we understand Mary's consent— with all the stories of sexual harassment and abuse by powerful men in the news right now—it's important to cut through the patriarchal stereotypes of Mary that pervade our consciousness and tend to be biblically inaccurate. It's important to review, like the 4/5th grade students in our OWL comprehensive sexuality class this fall, the definition of the word "consent." Because by mythologizing Mary and placing her on a pedestal it communicates that all women should be submissive and demure. If Mary is a shrinking violet and she's hailed as the most perfect woman of all time, it implies that women shouldn't stand up for themselves or have personal agency or that their worth is as handmaidens to men.

When we go back to the Gospel, we see that Mary, in fact, is no shrinking violet, and I'd like to offer three examples of that.

In verse 38 Mary says, "Here I am," the classic *hineini*, response of so many prophets before her. In that one phrase, "Here I am" she claims her lineage to Moses and Abraham, who also accepted God's call to do something difficult and important. She claims her decision making power to consent to what will happen to her body— at great risk to her own safety. The punishment for adultery was death by stoning, and Joseph would have had the option to turn her in to the authorities. If Joseph hadn't accepted Mary, she would have been quite exposed as a young single mother—Mary knew all of these risks and still said, Yes. Here I am.

A second example of Mary being a strong force is that she chooses to travel on dangerous journeys. When we see women in the Bible they're usually in their domestic context doing traditional activities. Think of Sarah cooking in her tent, Rebekah drawing water at the well, Martha cleaning house. Mary is never mentioned doing any of those things. What we do get is a picture of Mary traveling on dangerous journeys (how brave is she!)– to see Elizabeth in the hill country, to be counted in Herod's census in Bethlehem, back to Nazareth where her son could grow, to Jerusalem for Passover. When life presents her with a dangerous road, she laces up her boots and leans in. That's a model I think we could strive to emulate. When I was recruiting adult mentors for this year's confirmation class, one phone-call stood out for me. I had called Marna MacKenzie to ask if she'd consider being a mentor, and she said she'd like to take some time to think about it. She called me back the next day and left a message, saying that she didn't really see herself as mentor-material but that she would say yes. She would say yes not because she knew what she was doing but because it got her out of her comfort zone, and she said, it's always good to stretch and try something new! In this way, Marna MacKenzie took the more difficult path; she laced up her boots and leaned in.

A third example of Mary being strong and capable is the Magnificat itself. Mary stands in the home of a temple priest and lifts up her voice to sing this revolutionary song. Some ancient texts actually point to Elizabeth as the one who sings the Magnificat– could it be that Elizabeth teaches Mary the words to sing? Imagine, over the three months Mary stays with Elizabeth, how their bodies change, and how they might sing together– the song of a God who brings life out of Elizabeth's sterility, who lifts up a lowly peasant-girl like Mary, and whose name is holy. Maybe Mary went home singing; maybe she sang in a low hum as she labored in Bethlehem, so far from family and support. And perhaps she sang the Magnificat out loud as she rested in the stable in Bethlehem where she gave birth. Perhaps she sang to the impulses of Empire with defiance, singing of a God who scatters the proud in the greed of their hearts, and brings the powerful down from their thrones. Every time and place has an Empire to sing to– which is a sign that we still, even now, must do the work envisioned by the Magnificat. God is still working through us and in us to bring about the kin-dom of God.

IV.

Mary is worth emulating not because she is gentle, meek, acquiescent, or a virgin– but because she is a strong traveler on the journey– the journey of faith and justice-making. She commits her whole self, even her body, to saying yes– yes to bearing the Jesus-Child, yes to taking the difficult road that will make a difference in the world,

yes to the vision of the kin-dom of God in the Magnificat. And this Advent may we be converted again to this defiant song, not a verse wrapped in gentle comfort but an audacious dream of how the world will be when God's kin-dom comes. Amen.