

Rehabbing Mary
The Rev. Amy Spagna
December 22, 2024 – Advent 4
Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-45

Mary,
 Nazareth girl:
What did you know of ethereal beings
 with messages from God?
What did you know of men
 when you found yourself with child?
What did you know of babies,
 you, barely out of childhood yourself?
God-chosen girl:
What did you know of God
 that brought you to this stable
 blessed among women?
Could it be that you had been ready
 waiting
 listening
 for the footsteps
 of an angel?
Could it be there are messages for us
 *if we have the faith to listen?*¹

I have to admit: Mary has historically been among my least favorite characters of the Advent season. It's not what she did in saying yes to God that makes me uncomfortable with her. It's the box she's been folded, spindled, and mutilated into over the centuries of theological debate surrounding her that does. It's more than a little unsettling that her answering of God's call has gotten turned into something more than the brave "yes" that it is, and that her voice, with few exceptions, isn't part of the gospel narrative after this one spectacular moment. (The Gospel of John is the only place where she appears publicly during Jesus' ministry. It depicts her as the catalyst for Jesus' first miracle, changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana, but that's the last

¹ Ann Weems, "Mary, Nazareth Girl." In *Kneeling in Bethlehem* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 25.

we hear either from or about her, until Jesus directs the Beloved Disciple to care for her while he's hanging from the cross).

What I particularly dislike about Mary is what the Church has made her into. The role of Mary was originally debated as part of a wider conversation about how Jesus can have both human and divine natures in the same container. As part of that debate, the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE came to the consensus that she was the source material for Jesus' human half, and so she was to be known as the *theotokos*, the "God bearer." The opposing position, which called her the "Christ bearer," held that she was just a means to God's ends, and Jesus' human half did not depend on her participation at all. The letters we have from the bishops on both sides of that debate are not particularly kind. Their statements to the effect that "if you don't believe the way I do, you're out" is about the nicest they get - though in the end, the Council, and the one at Chalcedon which followed it in 451, affirmed Mary's status as the God-bearer.

While it's well documented that Mary was held in high regard by many of the Early Church's best thinkers, it wasn't until fairly recently in terms of church history that particular pieces of doctrine began to be officially attached to Mary. For example, the idea that she herself was completely without sin was first codified by Pope Pius IX in 1854. The papal encyclical declaring that she was "assumed" directly into heaven at her death appeared in 1950. Most recently, Pope Francis has pushed back against efforts to have her declared the co-redeemer of the world alongside Jesus.

Anglicans tend to take all this with a grain of salt, as well as the approach favored by 16th-century Reformers like Thomas Cranmer and Richard Hooker which can be summed up as "it's not essential, so if it works for you, great; if not, also great." In

practice, that means "Your Mileage May Vary." When I was in elementary school, there were times when it seemed like Mary was marketed to us as kind of a catch-all female role model: be like her. Say yes without question when you're asked to do big things. Put everyone else's needs above your own. And above all else, aspire to be a mother like her, even if it costs you your own life.

Yeah. Not that appealing.

HOWEVER, to focus only on the caricature-like girl with the blue veil misses the truly subversive parts of her story as Luke tells it:

- One, that she, and her cousin Elizabeth, who really had no business being pregnant at either of their ages, both bring children into the world for the express purpose of God changing the world;
- Two, that God is relying on two women, absolute nobodies in the patriarchal society of their day, to take leading roles in God's latest attempt to turn the world upside down. Note that, with the exception of Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, none of their male relatives is involved at this point.
- Three, stemming from both number 1 and number 2, it is Elizabeth who does the work of a prophet. She is the first to say out loud what God has done... and is the first to suggest that Mary's faithful response is a better place to focus than on all the rest of the stuff that's been attached to her.

We've more or less been dropped right smack into the middle of this familiar tale. The entire first chapter of Luke sets up the births of Jesus and his cousin John the Baptist. The lectionary has left out both birth announcements. This omission brings into sharp focus the actions and words of Mary and Elizabeth. Mary goes to visit her relative

"with haste." Perhaps she wants to verify what the angel told her. Or maybe she couldn't wait to share her own news. For her part, Elizabeth becomes the first human to recognize the as-yet unborn Jesus for who he really is. She reacts to seeing Mary by using the word "blessed" a total of three times in quick succession. In Greek, it's actually two different words: *eulogemene* and *makaria*. *Eulogemene* is actually a present participle, so it really gives the sense that the blessing Elizabeth names is both a present reality and an ongoing action. *Makaria* will come up again in the Sermon on the Mount, – as in, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20b, NRSV). "Mary is blessed because despite all expectations her social status has been reversed: she will be honored rather than shamed for bearing this child. But she has also been blessed with divine joy — with beatitude — because she has believed that God is able to do what God promises to do."²

When Elizabeth says that Mary is *eulogemene*, she very subtly draws a contrast between Mary's faith in God and Zechariah's skepticism. Remember, Zechariah didn't believe it when the angel told him he was finally going to be a father, and he was rendered unable to speak until John was named. Mary, on the other hand, asked only for an explanation, and then said, "Okay." The irony is, Zechariah, a priest who has staked his life on God's faithfulness, is the one to openly express his doubts... where Mary, a barely teenaged and perhaps illiterate peasant girl harbored no such doubts.

² Judith Jones, "Commentary on Luke 1:39-45 [46-55]." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-139-45-46-55-3> [accessed December 11, 2024].

It was her trust which opened the door for God's ongoing act of blessing – and it is this which Elizabeth celebrates with the exclamation, "Blessed are you among women!"³

Can we really be sure this happened as Luke describes it? No, we can't. There weren't video cameras around back in those days, and the memories of the people who told the story to Luke and/or Luke's secretaries may not have been all that reliable. However, it doesn't mean that there isn't some nugget of truth contained here. It's that the faithful response of two marginalized people was enough to change the whole world. All it took was trust... which is a tall order in an era when we're not sure whom we can trust to begin with. That uncertainty does not, however, apply to God. While we cannot ever be certain of the exact outcome when we either ask for God's help, or God asks something of us which requires our consent, we can be certain that, because God is God, God is faithful, and so will not renege on promises the way people can and do. For that reason, we can be assured that the good things God tells us are about to happen will in fact be good things . Stay tuned for the rest of the story.

³ Ibid.