

A DANGEROUS SONG
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Luke 1:39-55

Our lesson for today, comes to us from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 1, which sets up the whole birth narrative in Luke 2. In this scene, Mary has just learned that she will give birth, to a son, and through him, whole new possibilities for liberation. She also learns that her elderly cousin Elizabeth is even further along in another unlikely pregnancy, because, the Spirit tells her, “nothing is impossible with God.” To which Mary replies with her famous, “let it be” ...And you know, I’ve started to wonder if those words might be a little less surrender and little more: “ok, Spirit. bring it on!” Because *this* is what comes next (our lesson for today).

Within a few days Mary set out and hurried to the hill country to a town of Judah, where she entered Zechariah’s house and greeted Elizabeth. As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice, she exclaimed, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why am I so favored, that the mother of the Messiah should come to me? The moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who believed that what our God said to her would be accomplished!”

Mary said:

*My soul magnifies you, O God
and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.
For you have looked with favor
upon your lowly servant,
and from this day forward
all generations will call me blessed.
For you, the Almighty, have done great things for me, and holy is your Name.
Your mercy reaches from age to age
for those who fear you.
You have shown strength with your arm;
you have scattered the proud in their conceit; you have deposed the mighty from their thrones and
raised the lowly to high places.
You have filled the hungry with good things, while you have sent the rich away empty.
You have come to the aid of Israel your servant, mindful of your mercy –the promise you made to
our ancestors –to Sarah and Abraham and their descendants forever.*

In her 1985 comic called “Dykes to Watch Out For” Alison Bechdel posited a simple metric of gender bias in movies. What came to be known as the Bechdel Test has 3 super simple criteria—a film “passes” if 1. There are at least two named female characters in the film, who 2. have a conversation with each other, that 3. is not about a male character. This bare minimum of female representation is, still, satisfied by only a little more than half of what Hollywood manages to churn out. Which is also to say, nearly half of all films have zero real female agency. Which I guess is not surprising in an industry where even today, only about 18% of all directors, writers, producers, editors, and cinematographers are women.

The Bechdel test is just one simple way of highlighting the persistent lack of women’s perspectives represented in the stories our culture tells itself about itself. If we have

learned anything at all in our recent studies of whiteness, race and privilege not to mention gender, sexuality and identity, it is that making space to hear, really and truly receive the full spectrum of diverse perspectives is critical in any effort to embrace the fullness of humanity and, frankly, have any clear grasp of reality at all. Representation matters.

And if Hollywood is bad at representing the experiences of women, the Bible is ever so much worse. Scripture, after all, was largely written by men, for men, about men—featuring men’s experiences, achievements, battles, and struggles with God. As in Hollywood, if women show up at all, they are most often mere props in these male-centric plots, and all too often they end in violence. For thousands of years, the sole interpreters of this have also been men. More recent feminist interpretation has brought to light a vast richness of wisdom no one ever noticed before. Including the simple observation that there are maybe 3 stories in all of scripture that satisfy the Bechdel Rule. The story before us today is one.

A whole lot more could be said about that. But what I want to suggest this morning, is that *this* is a story we might want to pay some extra attention to; something extraordinary is going on here.

Now, we know that Luke was written many decades after the events described. And we know that the Gospels are not news reports. They were written by people of faith to inspire people of faith—oppressed people faith, we really do need to remember. No one was standing by Mary with a video camera while she chatted with the Holy Spirit about her pregnancy, and no one was taking notes during her visit with her cousin Elizabeth. At the same time, the gospel accounts were also very intentionally grounded in history. The whole notion of the Divine moving in and through human experience and history and creation is foundational to the Hebrew faith tradition. And this ancient, revolutionary idea is what the incarnation is about—God with us, in us, the power of Love, birthing, healing, liberating, transforming humanity. Creation. Right here, right now.

So, this story of Mary is also surely grounded in deep memory. And something about this memory has always held particular power. So, very early on, the patriarchal Roman church crowned Mary Queen of Heaven, and put her way way up there somewhere, where she’d be no danger to anyone; later, patriarchal Protestantism just erased her completely.

And still, the deep and dangerous memory of this courageous, resilient and faith intoxicated woman lives on. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson in her game changing book “Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints” invites us to take a closer look. To be *present* to this real, flesh and blood, Jewish woman whose profound and transformational faith still echoes through the ages. Today, we remember Mary’s trust, her willingness for unknowing, that empowers her *yes* to full partnership with the Holy in bringing liberation to birth. And Johnson points out, these events described in Luke “actually subvert patriarchy by replacing the usual male participation with *ruah*, the creative Spirit of God.” Johnson recalls the famous 1863 speech by former slave, abolitionist and preacher Sojourner Truth. She was scolding the clerics invoking scripture to silence her. She proclaimed, “Where your Christ come from, honey? Where your Christ come from? He come from God and a woman. Man ain’t had nothin’ to do with it!” Johnson continues, “The unconventional woman and her child conceived

outside the patriarchal family structure begin fulfillment of the divine promise: Nothing is impossible for God.”

And, *this* is the claim that inspires Mary’s radical and exuberant song, her insistence on liberation as the final word. Known as the Magnificat, it is the longest set of words placed on the lips of any woman in the entire New Testament. It occurs in the context of Mary’s joyful encounter with her even more pregnant cousin Elizabeth. Another dangerous pregnancy, as Elizabeth becomes mother of John the Baptist. And this is all in the context of the silencing of the only male character in the story. Zechariah, Elizabeth’s husband, priest, symbol of religious authority, has been rendered mute because of his *lack of faith* in God’s promise. A clear contrast with Mary.

So, we have two poor, brown women, pregnant, vulnerable, on the margins of the margins, in dark and dangerous times, seeking each other out, and discovering joyful solidarity. As they listen to God and one another, they are inspired to choose hope, in spite of all the evidence. And when we listen with them, in joyful solidarity, perhaps our hope might also be born again.

The whole exchange between Mary and Elizabeth and Spirit is permeated with blessing. When Elizabeth insists that Mary and her baby are blessed, that she, Elizabeth is blessed by that blessing, when Mary declares that all generations will call her blessed, they are not referring to status, privilege or comfort. Blessed in this biblical sense means favored, honored, worthy of God’s abundant gifts. It’s an understanding of blessing that we have largely forgotten, according Diana Butler Bass, in her book *Grateful*, that we explored together this fall. Bass observes that in our aggressively materialistic culture, we tend to equate blessing with things and with status. It’s a distortion of blessing that erodes our capacity for authentic gratitude. We focus on giving thanks **for things** rather than cultivating a capacity for joy and gratefulness **in** all things and circumstances. *This* kind of gratefulness, more choice than emotion, is an essential source of resilience and resistance.

Bass refers us back to the Beatitudes, that foundational collection of Jesus sayings with the startling message: blessed are the poor, the meek, those who hunger, and mourn, the merciful and the peacemakers. This is not about happiness (as some translations would have it) its about worthiness. Its not about privilege, its about dignity – being favored by God. Being open and free enough to recognize, receive and rejoice in the greatest gifts of life and love.

Bass describes her experience at the Women’s March in Washington, where she joined protesters “marching the beatitudes.” Along with peacemakers, the merciful and the hungry, they carried signs declaring: blessed are the women, the uninsured, the immigrants, blessed are the LGBTQ.

The Beatitudes, Bass writes, all add up to this: Blessed are all of you who are disregarded by the powerful, for you are God’s beloved community.... these blessings are a protest against injustice.” And one more thing Bass points out -- the Beatitudes are plural; they are addressed to community. Jesus is not offering a blueprint for personal comfort, he’s sketching out a social vision, where God’s favor resides especially with those at the margins, an invitation to all who choose the way of love. This is God’s dream of beloved community, where we all move, together, closer and closer to the margins until the margins are no more. And listening to Mary’s song, it seems pretty clear where Jesus might have gotten these dangerous ideas. It was the lullaby his mother

sang to him, in the womb, in a stable, in exile, in danger and darkness, and even, one imagines, on the cross.

And here's the thing: if blessing is not privilege, privilege is also not, in this sense, a blessing, especially when it insulates us from each other and the Holy, when it motivates us to choose our personal comfort over faithful resistance, when it keeps us from hearing the voices of the marginalized. When we the privileged center ourselves, we can't possibly honor those at the margins, and so, *we* miss out on blessing. Honor, dignity, God's fullest abundance. So, who is at the margins in *our* lives, in our midst? Do we see them? Can we hear them?

Mary's song insists that the world will turn, the world must turn. By the power of Love, the world is turning, with or without *us*. It is a symphony of hope and an invitation to joyful solidarity. This is not the song of privilege, but if we can learn to listen, we just might find a way to join the song.