

Luke 1 : 39-45 (46-55)

Advent 4

The Gospel of Luke, above all books of the New Testament, is about women. It reads as if a woman might have written it. It begins with the birth of John the Baptist, focusing on Elizabeth, his mother. The next major section is Mary's story. Then follows the prophecy of an old woman named Anna. When the boy Jesus goes to the temple to debate the learned doctors, the only person Luke quotes is his mother. \_\_\_ Many of Luke's stories from Jesus' ministry are about women: the woman who was a sinner, the woman who wouldn't give up, the widow of Nain, the bent over woman, the widow who gave her mite. At the resurrection it was only women who had the faith to go to the garden tomb. The text lists Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of Jesus, and other women. Luke reports that when they told the disciples about the empty tomb the men assumed it was an idle tale and did not believe them. And mind you, all of this from a culture in which women didn't count. \_\_\_And most important of all, the central character in the birth narrative, a story only told by Luke, is the person closest to the event, Mary.

Now, there are two ways over the years I have imagined Mary. I have seen her as a frightened little girl, overwhelmed by events far beyond her control -- just a simple, rural, uneducated child who God had chosen to be the vessel of grace.

But there is another way to view Mary, a way more faithful to Luke's text. That is, as a determined, strong, assertive woman -- a woman of power and influence: educated, sharp, committed, resourceful, and competent. A woman who was blessed. \_\_ The key to this understanding of Mary comes from the words at the heart of today's Gospel text. We identify the poem Mary sang by the Latin translation of its first words, the "Magnificat," "My soul magnifies the Lord." \_\_

What do we know about Mary from Luke? Not very much really. We know the town where she lived, a dusty obscure village in the north, named Nazareth. Luke doesn't identify her family. They were nobodies from noplac. We know she was engaged to Joseph, a carpenter, whose family had come from the south, from Bethlehem, the city of David. Beyond that Joseph is a faithful, courageous, loyal husband and father who protects his family, and takes them out of harm's way when Herod the King, in his rage, seeks to destroy the infants of Bethlehem. But Luke does not report a word spoken by Joseph, or even what he thought about anything.\_\_ We know that one day Mary received a visitor, a messenger, imaged for us as the angel Gabriel. He tells her not to be afraid when she discovers she is pregnant. She has been chosen, favored, to play an important role in world history.

Upon hearing this news, "Mary was greatly troubled," says the text. I imagine she was! It is not every day an angel tells an expectant mother the child she is carrying is to be called, "the Son of the Most High." That he is to be a King, destined to sit on the throne of David forever.\_\_\_\_ When she was certain of the pregnancy, Mary does a very feminine thing. She seeks out another woman to talk to. She hears that her cousin, Elizabeth, is also pregnant. Mary makes the very long trip south to the hill country of Judea to visit her friend and relative. She stays three months. We do not know what they discussed. What they did. Had it been a man who had something important to talk about with a male friend, the whole thing would probably have been over in a couple of hours—with every detail written down. Men, you see, are seldom able to talk intimately with other men. Perhaps we are too competitive. Perhaps to talk deeply is to share more about ourselves and our weaknesses than men are comfortable revealing. If somebody knows about what's going on down inside, he may have an advantage over you. For whatever reasons, it is women who can spend endless hours, days and weeks nestled comfortably in each other's souls.\_\_\_\_

We do know that Elizabeth realizes something important has happened to Mary, that she has found favor with God and is blessed among women -- and she says so. Again, men will hardly offer that gentle kind of affirmation to other men. We might slap each other on the back, but there won't be much tenderness about it.

Not so with women. Mutual support, cooperation, kinship, gentleness often lie at the heart of women's important conversations -- not competition. \_\_In the musical, *My Fair Lady*, the lead male character asks, "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" I'm not certain the world now needs a new crop of competitive, masculine people. The world has enough of competition, jousting for honored places, scratch and kick your way to the top of the pile. That lifestyle is what causes wars. Perhaps the question for our day is, "Why can't a man be more like a woman?" More cooperative than competitive, more intimate than public, more accepting of others than needing to show off your own prowess?

At any rate, w\_hatever the nature of this three-month-long conversation, the result, heard from Mary's lips, is anything but the song of a frightened, sweet, ignorant, submissive girl. She sings: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. " \_\_It is not an original song. Much of it comes from a thousand years earlier. Another strong woman, named Hannah, realizes she is pregnant. Her child too will change the history of Israel. She will call him Samuel, and he will finally anoint David King. Hannah sings: \_\_

My heart exalts in the Lord; \_\_ my strength is exalted in the Lord. \_\_ The bows of the mighty are broken, \_\_but the feeble gird on strength. \_\_ The Lord makes the poor rich, \_\_ he brings low, he also exalts. \_\_ He raises the poor from the dust \_\_ and lifts the needy.

\_\_Ten centuries later Mary sings: \_\_

He has shown strength with his arm, \_\_he has scattered the proud. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, \_\_and exalted those of low degree. \_\_He has fulfilled the hungry with good things,\_\_ and the rich he has sent empty away.\_\_

Could Mary have known Hannah's song? If so, she was not the illiterate simple girl we have sometimes pictured her as being. Educated, knowledgeable about the scriptures, aware of the dynamics of history and tuned in to the will and plan of God -- that's the Mary of the Magnificat.\_\_

I have often wondered where Jesus got his view of the world. How is it he identified with the poor, and had such a difficult time with the mighty? Why was he so unmasculine in his rejection of violence as the way of the future, of competition as the source of power and wealth? Where did he get the idea that was to be the lynchpin of his life; that abundance did not lie in doing well but in doing good? Where did he come upon the notion that God demanded compassion, gentleness, humility; that the meek would inherit the earth, the merciful obtain mercy, the pure in heart see God and the peacemakers be called God's children?\_\_ Listen to the words of Mary's song and you will discover where Jesus got his image of the world and of the will of God. He got it from his mother.

Could it be that these were the things Mary and Elizabeth talked about for three months?\_\_ From that long conversation comes a song, a reflection of Hannah's song of long ago. And from that song has come to us the ethic of Jesus of Nazareth, the Prince of Peace, savior of the world.

\_\_Blessed are you, Mary, blessed are you among women. And blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. And blessed are all those who hear him, believe him, follow him in the ways of peace and justice and love. "

Amen.