

Luke 1:26-55

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

December 20, 2020

What can we say about Mary?

Hymns and paintings often depict Mary as "meek and mild" because of her response to the angel's pronouncement. Although she asks how it can possibly come to pass, she then says, "let it be as you have said." She accepts the angel's news, and God's action. Mary-meek-and-mild is a culturally useful image: There is no more iconic woman in the Bible, except possibly Eve, and if this iconic woman, Mary is meek, mild, passive, acquiescing to the plans of a God envisioned as male, perhaps it's useful in justifying a status quo where wealthy and powerful men are in charge.

Maybe that's why some painters and hymn writers seem to stop reading the Bible at Luke 1:38. At verse 39, she reaches Elizabeth's house, and suddenly Mary becomes a firebrand. She declares that, by acting in and through her, God has already determined a future where the proud are scattered, the powerful brought down and the rich are empty-handed. The faithful are shown mercy; the lowly are lifted up; the hungry are filled. I don't know why we depict Mary with her hands

clasped, her eyes downcast, dressed in her traditional blue-and-white robe. Why don't we paint her in an anarchist T-shirt, brandishing a torch and a pitchfork?

But before progressive folks get too excited, they too should read further, because Luke's Gospel reaches the end with the proud mostly still in their places, the powerful on their thrones, and the rich quite comfortable.

What can we say about Mary, then? Is prophecy the sort of thing we see in Star Wars, a slightly ambiguous but still certain statement of future events? If so, then Mary isn't much of a prophet. Maybe the angel's visit was a mere dream, or hallucination, or wishful thinking. The idea that a virgin will have a child seems crazy, and that her son will sit on David's throne, preposterous. Why should Mary expect even Joseph, her husband, to believe her? Sometimes one person's hope is another's delusion.

What should we say about ourselves? What should we say about those who call themselves disciples of an executed itinerant Jew from two thousand years ago? We proclaim that the source and sustainer of all life became somehow incarnate in this one person, a long time ago in a land far away, and that this is still relevant to our lives today. Furthermore, we sing and recite the claims of Hebrew prophets like Amos and Hosea, like Hannah, like Mary, who proclaim that God is

turning the world upside down. And yet we fight wars. We elect dictators. We nod in approval as some seek out food banks while others acquire billions in personal wealth. Two thousand years later, the powerful are *still* on their thrones.

For that matter, what shall we say about those who marry, when the Canadian divorce rate is over 30%? About those who have children, knowing full well all the sorrows and complications of life? Do they foolishly anticipate a problem-free future for themselves and their children, despite the odds? Are they crazy to do so?

Maybe we are a bit crazy. For this is Love Sunday, and what is love, if not a kind of insanity? I say to my wife and my daughter, "You are strange. You are infuriating. You are fascinating and wonderful. I can't imagine life without you."

"You are frustrating, nevertheless I love you. You broke my computer, nevertheless I love you."

We may be crazy to hope and plan for lives together, but love makes it impossible not to.

We tend to think about love the same way we think about Mary: as a meek and mild emotion. But it is love which enables us to dream. It is love that anchors our feet to the ground so our spirits can soar. Luke's nativity account never once

mentions Joseph; was Mary confident enough in his love that his response to her miraculous pregnancy wasn't an issue?

We get married despite the risk of heartbreak and we dare to dream a future together. We dare things together that we might not have dared if we were apart. We dare to raise a child because we can rely on each other. We dare to be parents because we are bound in love to our children, and vice versa.

And when human love fails, we fall back on the love of God.

Mary is steeped in generation after generation of Jewish stories about the love of God: a God who creates because that's what God does. A God who liberates because that is who God is. A God who calls and corrects and chastises and repents because God is too in love with these crazy, frustrating, amazing, wondrous human beings and with all of creation to ever walk away. And so Mary's Magnificat echoes the triumphant speech of her ancestor Hannah, a childless woman through whom the prophet Samuel was finally born. Mary knows these stories, and therefore knows that the idea that the active and liberating Spirit of God would be incarnated like never before in a woman in Bethlehem and in her son is not crazy at all. It is inevitable. Mary knows who God is and will be, because Mary knows who God has been. God dares to dream a future for her

people, and Mary dares to dream alongside God, because God is engaged in a millennia-long love affair that anchors their feet so their hearts can soar.

To be sure, some of the things we plan in this ecstatic state never come to pass. Maybe we don't have the children we planned to have. Maybe we never take that vacation we planned. Maybe a suitable partner never showed up. Maybe that job we dared to apply for never panned out. Maybe that sickness made some things impossible. Maybe we never get around to tearing the powerful from their thrones.

But Biblical prophecy is not a sneak peek into the future. It is not for people blessed with supernatural insight. It is for young unmarried women and young carpenters, for every human being. It is nothing more or less than catching the infectious, sort of crazy love of God for the world in which we dream, then conceive, then achieve the impossible in each human lifetime.

Amen.

Sources:

Skinner, Matthew L. "Luke 1:39-55: Can We Speak of God's Activity, in Triumph or in Tragedy?" *Huffpost*, December 6, 2017,
<https://www.huffpost.com/entry/luke-1-39-55-can-we-speak-of-gods->

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