



Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 20, 2009

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In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country... Can we imagine this uphill journey for Mary, a pregnant, unmarried teenager? First of all, it was a dangerous walk for a young woman alone. Can we imagine the turmoil she felt? This week I spoke with several women about Mary's journey. Leland Baldwin reminded me of what she called, "the awesome process of pregnancy...when a woman is both frightened and excited as her whole life changes."

Remember, too, Mary's encounter with the mysterious messenger who told her she had been chosen to give birth to God's son. Whenever I picture her meeting with the angel Gabriel, I think of the words of the carol: "Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head, to me be as it pleaseth God she said." Mary said YES to God's life changing mission!

But saying yes put her in a scandalous position in society. As Kathleen Moore, a member of our vestry said to me this week, "She had three strikes against her. She was a teenager, unmarried and pregnant." Let us remember that a Jewish woman in the Roman Empire of the first century had very few options in life. When she became betrothed to a man, she was his possession. He owned her. A betrothed woman who was pregnant could be punished or put to death if her husband accused her of infidelity.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste... She was getting out of town. She received God's message and deliberately made an appointment with someone she trusted. Mary went to see Elizabeth, a matriarch in her family. The angel had told her that Elizabeth, an older woman, was also pregnant. Elizabeth had endured a lifetime without having a child, and the same society that marginalized Mary would have stereotyped Elizabeth. She was "barren." Clearly Mary and Elizabeth shared a bond, for when Mary arrived and said a greeting, the babe within

Elizabeth leaped for joy. To Elizabeth that was a sign from God! She was stirred by the Holy Spirit and sang a song of blessing for Mary: *Blessed are you among women and blessed with the fruit of your womb.*

What a reception Mary received! Such welcome! Such understanding! Such acceptance and encouragement! Out of this love, Mary bursts into song: *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on [my] lowliness...for the Mighty One has done great things for me...*

Sometimes it is those long, uphill, strenuous journeys of life that produce such spiritual strength. Mary's encounter with the messenger, her reflection on her mission, her long walk to the hill country and her meeting with her spiritual mentor, Elizabeth, has brought about a transformation. She is no longer gentle Mary, meek and mild. With joy and exuberance she boldly proclaims her experience of God! God has entered her life, the life of a woman on the lowest levels of society, and raised her up by giving her a holy mission and a holy purpose. Mary's song, the Magnificat, is a song about God the liberator and revolutionary! She proclaims that God has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful from their thrones, lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. These five divine actions are important in Luke's Gospel, for they will be fully revealed in Jesus' life and ministry.

Listen to these five actions again: God has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful from their thrones, lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God turns everything upside down! Those who think they are first are last, and the last are first. Those who think they are insiders are outsiders, and the outsiders are in. Mary understands this.

In the past week I reflected on the transformation in Mary's life. It made me think of women who have been very influential in my Christian formation. I arrived at the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale University in 1977, a time when our church was undergoing a great transition. The 1979 Book of Common Prayer, now thirty years old, was being formulated. The Hymnal 1940 was being revised. I entered this seminary community where over fifty per cent of the students were women from all denominations. Yale is an ecumenical seminary. From the beginning I wrote papers using inclusive language.

As a rector in Dunedin, I was blessed by the opportunity to work with Suzy Miller, a strong woman who served as a consultant to the House of Bishops. During my tenure at Good Shepherd, we called the Rev. Mary Anne Dorner as the first woman priest to serve in that congregation. She lives right here in Wesley Chapel, and I deeply value our friendship.

St. John's values and encourages women in the life of this congregation. Over 67% of the leaders of our groups are women, and they play an important part in our vestry and staff.

I deliberately phoned my friend, Sandy Moyle, this week. Sandy played such an important part here in St. John's and is thriving in St. Mark's in Jacksonville. I told her that many of our parishioners remember her as an important mentor. Sandy replied, "It was St. John's that mentored me." We talked about Mary's journey, and Sandy said, "Mary was strong! She shows us the progression from lowly maiden to prophet."

How does Mary's journey, her progression from lowly maiden to prophet, speak to us as a parish?

I think our congregation is showing a deeper compassion for people who are marginalized. Today our parishioners want to know and understand the Marys of Tampa. Two weeks ago I was sitting in the Parish Hall talking with women who were here for our annual Angel Tree event. I met mothers of very young children, as well as aunts and grandmothers, and they all had something in common: someone in their family was in prison. They were doing the best they could to raise their children. I was impressed by their capacity to speak about their faith. One woman described losing a minimum wage job and her struggle to find work. She said she could always trust in God and her church to stand with her in times of trial!

I believe St. John's community is on a long, strenuous, uphill journey. We are traveling in the hill country and we need Elizabeth! We need mentors who will help us grow from being quiet, humble servants to bold, joyful prophets! We need mentors, both men and women, who will share their encouragement!

As we continue our journey, let us all remember what Gabriel said to Mary: *For nothing with be impossible with God.*