

Revolutionary Mary

I find the liturgical season of Advent absolutely fascinating. I've spoken before, although not, I think, recently about how intrigued I am by the many paradoxes of our faith – things like a God who is both transcendent, too different from us to be encompassed by our thought, and immanent, so intimately involved in our lives that we say God's Spirit dwells within us, or the identity of Jesus the Christ, fully God and fully human. In Advent, I find that central Christian paradox of already and not yet. We proclaim that Christ has already come and comes again and again to us, yet we hold this as a time of anticipation and waiting for his coming. In our broader culture, Christmas seems to have already come and may nearly be over, though it is not here yet. The carols are playing, retailers have been promoting Christmas for months and we are given the feeling that if we are not all done with our cards and our gift shopping, then we are terribly, terribly late. Perhaps our cultural Christmas had descended into Wonderland and we are all the anxious White Rabbit, peering at our collective pocket watch... "Oh, my tail and whiskers!" It rather makes me want to sit and hide myself in a quiet corner, although, thanks to the tender ministrations of some of my friends, I'm less likely to dismiss the season with a churlish "Bah, Humbug!"

Still, there is a peculiar tension to Advent, that sense of something coming that I'd thought was already here, the vague notion that I've missed doing something that I thought was done. As I was reading Scriptures this week and trying to decide what to preach, I was struck again by how the passages traditionally assigned to this season and the liturgical traditions of the Church promote this sense of paradox. The customary Advent virtues – Hope, Peace, Joy and Love – are all celebrated in those Scriptures. But there is something else underneath them as well, a sense of enormous, world-changing power about to be unleashed. That odd and paradoxical mix is especially apparent to me in the pairing of Scriptures I've chosen for this morning, two passages that sound at first like lovely, safe harbingers of our sweetest Christmas visions but that also contain a dangerous call for revolutionary activity that could put nearly every part of our accustomed lives into question. So, we'll spend a little time this morning with Mary and her song, which we used in slightly changed form as our Call to Worship, and Micah and his vision of Bethlehem. We'll connect with the well-known misty feelings of secure Christmases that they recall but we'll also consider how both Micah and Mary revealed a world turned upside down by God and how we are called to continue the revolution.

Let's think about Mary for a few minutes. We've sung and heard some songs this morning that show our traditional view of Mary: "Mary... that mother mild," "pure and lowly, maiden mother, wise and mild, joyful mother." We've heard the glorious update of the first part of Mary's song, part of my old friend Ragan Courtney's libretto for "Celebrate Life." It's wonderful to remember Mary's joy in the news that she is to bear the Son of God, the hope of all nations. All of these word images may conjure for us the traditional pictorial image of Mary – a modest young woman, eyes downcast in her humility, clothed in a blue robe that seems to exude peace and tranquility. But all of these sweet pictures only contain part of the truth. They all spring from the first half of Mary's song but perhaps we need to spend some time with the second half of the song as well as an alternate picture of Mary.

There is a complete tradition of pictorial representations of Mary that seems at odds with the meek young lady in blue that is perhaps most familiar. One of my personal favorite pictures of Mary is one I saw many years ago. I saw it only once but it has remained vivid for me ever

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since. It is a “Madonna and Child” by the Venetian painter Tiepolo and I saw it in the Museum of Fine Arts in Springfield, Massachusetts nearly 20 years ago. It is a work of the Italian Renaissance, so the characters, Mary and her baby, look like real people rather than like imagined archetypes. The toddler Jesus is a healthy looking little fellow with curly hair and a preternaturally wise and penetrating look in his eye. He is, however, clearly a little boy, not a grown-up rendered small. The mother is especially memorable. She sits erect, with a proud bearing and a fierce gleam to her eye. “Yes, my boy is special,” she seems to be saying, “and if you mess with him, you’ll be taking me on as well.” The prospect is daunting.

I wonder if Tiepolo, though an Italian, was influenced by Eastern Orthodox renditions of Mary. In the icons of that branch of Christianity, Mary is far more often pictured looking straight ahead at the viewer than down at her feet. Her gaze is direct and can be unsettling. Adding to the psychological evocation of strength and boldness, she is primarily dressed in red, rather than in the more pacific blue. According to the color symbology of icons, her red cloak over a blue under tunic is meant to convey how God has given her the mantle of her son’s divinity atop her humanity, so that she may be the *τηροτοκος*, the “God-bearer,” in Orthodox thought. But I must confess that whenever I see an icon from Russia with Mary so dressed, I cannot help but associate the color with another meaning so intimately linked in my mind with that nation. Mary in red is also Mary the Red – in other words, Revolutionary Mary.

Mary, a revolutionary? It sounds absurd when we consider the quiet figure with folded hands and cast down eyes that we all know so well from both high art and the commercial kitsch of plastic nativity sets and “Mary in a Bathtub” grottoes. But let’s listen again to the words of the Magnificat, especially the second half: “God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” Don’t be confused by what sounds like the past tense in English. In the Greek in which Luke recorded these words, the tense is what is known as the gnomic aorist and it denotes habitual action. In other words, God is going to keep on doing what God always does – rescue the downtrodden. Mary is rejoicing because she understands that God, through her, is about to keep the promise that the poor have longed to see come to fruition. Justice is coming, the corrupt regime will be brought down, the established order will be turned on its head. *Viva el revolucion!*

I am hardly the first to draw this conclusion about Mary. In his book, [The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus](#), Scott McKnight writes, “There are two Marys. One wears a Carolina blue robe, exudes piety from a somber face, often holds her baby son in her arms, and barely makes eye contact with us. The real Mary,” McKnight writes, “was a subversive.” Or, as Jim Rice wrote after contemplating our scripture for this morning, “(Mary) sounds more like Mother Jones than Mother Teresa!”

McKnight goes on to detail just how revolutionary Red Mary was: “If you were a poor woman in the first century, if you were hungry, if you had experienced the injustices of Herod, and if you stood up in Jerusalem and announced that God would yank down the proud, the rulers, and the rich from their high places, you likely would be tried for subversion. If you were Herod or one of

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his ten wives or one of his many sons or daughters with (unexpressed, of course) hopes for the throne, you would conclude that Mary was a rebel, a revolutionary, a social protester.” In short, Mary could have been in serious trouble. Revolutionary Mary, however, was no stranger to trouble at this point. As an unmarried, pregnant woman, she was subject not merely to the gossiping tongues of her friends, not merely to ostracism from the good people of Nazareth, but to a death sentence. Had Joseph been a less compassionate man, Mary and her unborn baby could well have ended up at the bottom of a pile of stones in a ravine outside Nazareth. But this teenaged girl, who is, as we used to say, “in trouble,” this potential enemy of the state, this poverty-stricken unwed mother, lifts up her voice and sings!

This is part of the remarkable nature of Mary. She comes from the bottom of a harsh and feudal society, she has more troubles than many of us could bear and yet she thanks God for sending her those troubles and proclaims that she sees God’s future of Good News for the downtrodden dawning in her very experience. Mary’s joy in her unborn child and for God comes bursting through. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” The audacity of Mary’s vision echoes down across the centuries. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to 1944 and sometimes called the most brilliant man to hold that post since St. Anselm in the 12th century, is said to have warned his missionaries to India never to read the Magnificat in public. Christians were already suspect in that country and they were cautioned against reading verses so inflammatory.

It may be a surprise to us to think of Mary as a revolutionary but we may be less surprised to come to such a conclusion about Micah. Prophets, after all, are always set against societal norms when they clash with the path of God for humankind. Like Mary, Micah was probably poor. He certainly came from a rural place almost as obscure as Nazareth, a little village called Moresheth. And like Mary, Micah fervently believed that God was preparing to turn the world upside down. If you took the short amount of time to read his little book, only seven chapters, you would find his observations on the injustice and oppression exercised by the rich and powerful in society, the false utterances of prophets, the indifference of rulers, commercial malpractice and the wickedness of priests. Sounds rather topical, doesn’t it? Against all this, he sets his vision of God’s action which will be based in yet another small, unimportant place – the little town of Bethlehem, a sort of “county seat” for the smallest clan in the tribe of Judah. The Hebrew word used to describe the clan of Ephrathah, which our NRSV translates as “little,” could more properly be rendered “least” or “insignificant.” Just as Mary believes that the lowly will be lifted up, so Micah sees the Savior of Israel, the Shepherd of God’s flock, rising from the obscurity of the rural poor.

By the way, Micah’s prophecy for Bethlehem is topical in a way I had not known until this week. Readings of this passage nearly always start at verse two of chapter five but when I glanced up at verse one this week, I felt a shiver of familiarity. “Now you are walled around with a wall; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek.” For the past several years, Bethlehem has indeed been “walled around with a wall” as the Israeli government has built walls around their settlements in the West Bank land seized during the 1967 war. Depending on whose interpretation you follow, the wall is either to protect innocent Israeli

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settlers from extremist Muslims or to make it easier for Israel to annex the land in an eventual peace treaty. Whatever the motivation for its construction, the result has been to cut off Bethlehem from easy access to the outside world, reducing tourism (which is Bethlehem's economic engine) by a huge factor (unemployment is over 50 percent), and driving the primarily Christian population into exile. The current Archbishop of Canterbury has described the wall as "a symbol of all that is wrong in the human heart." In many ways, it is truly a slap in the face of the town's most famous son, the rightful ruler of Israel and the one who came preaching God's love for all Creation.

But I find Micah's prophecy familiar in another, more positive way as well. I don't know what the actual numbers are but as I visit with other Evergreen Association pastors or other pastors in our vicinity or see their buildings or attend their special events or read their newsletters, I often come away with the feeling that in terms of sheer numbers we must be one of the little clans of Evergreen or of Lynnwood. From my conversations with folks in the community, I know that we are among the insignificant – I can't tell you how many people that I've talked to who've lived in Lynnwood or Edmonds for years say to me as I describe Good Shepherd, "Really? There's a church there?" And yet, thanks to our God who raised little Bethlehem to be the most famous of all little towns and who elevated the poor peasant girl to be Queen of the Universe, little, insignificant Good Shepherd has been empowered to accomplish mighty works. I hope you all read the American Baptist Foundation blog I linked to in our newsletter this week, in which Rev. Rick Barlow expresses his astonishment and inspiration at what you all have accomplished in Shepherd's Garden. And if you read my column in the Enterprise this week, you'll know that our hosting of the Freezing Weather Shelter is causing us to be talked about not only in other churches but by the politically-active folk of our area. We may be small but God has given us a mighty reach. Surely, if there was ever an occasion for joy on the third Sunday of Advent, the impact we've been able to have on the lives of people in need is such an occasion for us. Can I have an Amen?

What we are called to remember on this Sunday of Joy is that we must continue to spread the joy we have found in serving God and God's people. We must take up the revolutionary banner of Micah and of Mary that promises the elevation of the lowly and the filling of the hungry while those who have profited from the misery of others receive a new perspective. Are we comfortable with Mary's song? Not just the personal gratitude of the first half, which we heard sung this morning in Ragan Courtney and Buryl Red's modern version, but the part that promises complete upheaval in what may be our very comfortable lives? Do we participate in the revolution? In these passages and the Magnificat of Mary in particular, as many commentators have pointed out, the Good News is "a word of hope to many and a word of challenge to some." James F. Kay of Princeton Theological Seminary asks, "Can the God who is going to knock the powerful off their peacock thrones, their stock exchange seats, their professional chairs, and their benches of judgment really be our God? Can we really praise this God — Mary's God?" Or will we turn away, seeking comfort where our culture tells us we will find it, in excessive consumption and self-seeking behavior? Will we, like Mary, rely on God to fill us with the truly good things? Or will we go on gorging ourselves on what we can make and get under our own human power, even though we are killing ourselves and our planet in our mad hunger, trying desperately to fill the emptiness that only God can bless. What room do we make in our most inward parts for the indwelling of the Prince of Peace, Love Incarnate? Reflecting on such

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questions, Kathleen Norris has written, “As I pray the Magnificat, I am asked to consider how I have done in this regard. Have I been so rich, stuffed full of myself, my plans, and my possessions, that I have in effect denied Christ a rightful place on earth? Or am I poor and despairing, but in my failures, weakness, and emptiness more ready and willing to be filled with God's purpose?”

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,” sang Revolutionary Mary, as she gave voice to her joy over the prospect of her baby. “The people of God shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace,” proclaimed Micah, looking forward with joy to that same baby, the One born to be the Messiah of God. We have joined our voices to theirs this morning. We have lit the pink candle, remembering that Jesus, born in Bethlehem Ephrathah, is the bringer of true and everlasting joy. Let us go forth to carry that joy to all people this Advent season, so that the hearts of humans and the soul of our society might be truly touched by the Revolution of Hope and Peace and Joy and Love. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.