

THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS

The Gift of Anticipation

TEXT: Micah 5:2-5a and Luke 1: 39-45

The prophet Micah cries aloud “But you, O Bethlehem...from you shall come forth for me the one who is to be ruler in Israel”. Much later Luke’s Gospel tells us that Mary said with confidence, “With God nothing will be impossible”.

The choice of this short passage from Micah is certainly a good one for today. What Micah wanted for Israel and the nations is precisely what the early Christians believed - that the coming of their Christ meant for their world: justice, unity, peace. It is the hope of every Christmas. It is the hope of this Christmas.

For the prophet Micah as well as for us, God has promised something new and he looks toward that hope. It’s not unlike what we want even today. But the world will not look the way it looked to Micah. This sleepy little town called Bethlehem is seen by the prophet using different standards. God does not live or act with the understood “rules” of the world. Bethlehem, a small seemingly poor, sort of “no name” city will produce something wonderful. The mighty in this world will fall. The lowly will be exalted. And the last one that you would imagine will be the one to usher in the peace and vision of God. For it is here in this tiny breath of a town that heaven will soon touch the earth and nothing will ever be the same again. The power of hope changes the boundaries and changes the rules in which we live. God’s vision, a great “reversal” of the expected, has begun.

And then along comes Luke to confirm the prophetic words of Micah. What Mary has been asked to do is nothing short of staggering: to carry, nurture and birth the Son of God. She has been charged with birthing the salvation of the world. Annunciation literally means “the announcement”. The word by itself probably holds no real mystery, but it is the beginning of the central tenet of our entire Christian faith – the Annunciation, Incarnation, Transfiguration, Resurrection. For us, it begins the mystery

of Jesus the Christ, for us the fog lifts and there before us is the bridge between the human and the Divine. It is the beginning of the birth story.

And as Mary waits, she goes to her cousin's house. Elizabeth was probably surprised. After all, it wasn't like Mary could call ahead or text her to tell her of the coming birth. As the young girl enters the house, Elizabeth, also pregnant after so many years of trying, feels her womb move, as if the tiny fetus somehow felt a presence that she could not. And in that moment, Elizabeth got it. Mary, her young cousin, the girl with no important name and no real pedigree, was part of something bigger than herself. Mary's life up until now was nothing. She was young, poor, female. In her mind, her life really did not amount to anything. But now she is blessed. Now she is named "oh favored one". She must look at life differently and find that part of the mystery of God that is within her and that she is called to live.

So we look at Mary. She is revered. She is honored. She is blessed. And we watch the Christmas pageants and look upon the smiling, quiet, most perfect, and the most boring girl. Most often Mary is just a silent prop up there, holding a baby and looking sweet. I'd like to take that image of Mary and turn it on its side and look at Mary as I see her, because she is way fiercer and more powerful than that.

I see Mary as a modern, strong teenage woman, and I'll use her words from what we call the Magnificat to show you what I mean. We did not read these words in our scripture lesson today; we ended the reading just before they appear in the Gospel of Luke.

So listen to Mary's words now and in your mind see this young woman who has just been given the most amazing message ever recorded.

She begins by acknowledging that she has been honored above all others: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me

blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.”

I don't believe this comes from some one meek and mild. She has recognized that God has stepped away from anything ordinary. God has broken all the rules and Mary is announcing to the world that she too is not afraid of upsetting the status quo. She has heard the word of God and is ready to take her place as one who follows boldly to take on the bearing of the Savior of the World.

And Mary continues to speak: “God has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.”

What's this? Mary is talking about God overthrowing human rulers and overturning society and showing strength against the proud and the rich. Yes, she is important for her role as the mother of the Messiah, but is also representative of the people of low status, the oppressed. Her tone may be meek and mild, but she's talking about overthrowing the system.

Contemporary artist Ben Wildflower grew up evangelical, reading the Bible over and over. Yet he never heard the song of Mary emphasized in church until he started attending an Anglican congregation. There, the Magnificat was a part of the evening prayer in the Book of Common Prayer, where he found it to be beautiful and profound. “She's a young woman singing a song about toppling rulers from their thrones”, he says. “She's a radical who exists within the confines of institutionalized religion”. Some Christians have taken issue with Wildflower's image and its political nature. I invite you to look at the back of today's insert for his picture of Mary. Wildflower noted that Mary's song doesn't sound like good news if you are well fed, or rich, or in a position of

power and might – or if you benefit from systems that oppress. How does the Magnificat feel if you aren't only of the lowly, if you aren't as vulnerable and humble as Mary?

Theologian Warren Carter writes that in the time of Jesus, just 2 to 3 percent of the population was rich, while the majority lived a subsistence-level existence. “Mary articulates an end to economic structures that are exploitative and unjust”, he says. “She speaks of a time when all will enjoy the good things given by God.”

In all my long years of being in church, of knowing the Christmas story backward and forward, I never heard these verses emphasized. Here, Mary comes across less like a scared and obedient 15-year-old and more like a rebel intent on reorienting unjust systems. I love this Mary. Where has she been all my life?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis, called the Magnificat “the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung”. Revolutionaries, the poor and the oppressed, all loved Mary and they emphasized her glorious song. But the Magnificat has been viewed as dangerous by people in power. Some countries – such as India, Guatemala and Argentina – have outright banned the Magnificat from being recited in liturgy or in public. And many evangelicals – in particular, white evangelicals – have devalued the role of Mary, and her song, to the point that she has almost been forgotten as anything other than a silent figure in a nativity scene.

So today I'm asking us, as we anticipate the Christmas story, to rethink Mary. The world in which we live today needs her message of the upheaval that comes with the birth of Jesus. I hope that Mary might be uncovered and become more of a three-dimensional human being. She was a woman of strength and courage. We need to take her out of the Christmas pageant legacy and see her as she encouraged Jesus to reveal his divinity at the wedding in Cana, followed him up the hill to Calvary, and stood with the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross.

We need to listen to Mary's song. It resonates in the world today. Like Mary, we live in a society that needs Jesus. We anticipate the coming of the Christ child and, like many other Christians we celebrate Christmas while living in the reality of waiting for true justice to come. If we listen carefully to her words, perhaps we can catch a glimpse of how much God cares about our political, economic and social realities.

So today we wait in anticipation of the coming of the Christ. The real gift of Christmas is on its way, and Mary has beautifully set the stage for the main event. It's coming! Amen