

December 17, 2017
Luke 1:26-27
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“Lady Courage”

Good morning! It is the third Sunday of our Advent adventure. Over the past two weeks we’ve heard about some different characters in God’s salvation story, and the part of it that we celebrate in the weeks leading up to Christmas and Jesus’ birth. These characters have chosen to step into this adventure, knowing that adventures have an element of danger and risk; adventures do not have safe and predictable outcomes. This is the adventure of God coming to earth, and it is a story that we have been invited to be a part of.

Last week I talked about the shepherds: ordinary people like you and me, who -- also like you and me -- were entrusted with the good news of the birth of our Savior. We are called not only to witness Jesus’ birth, but to share it with others, and have it make a difference in our lives.

Two weeks ago I talked about Joseph, a carpenter who embodied many of the characteristics we value in men: integrity, hard work, being responsible for those whom they love. Joseph had his steady, normal life turned upside down by a woman, and chose to enter the adventure when he listened to an angel. We’re going to talk about that woman and how *her* conversation with an angel put her in the middle of this adventure.

This woman’s name is Mary. It may be stretching our definitions a bit to call her a woman: she was likely about 14 or 15 years old, and had just become able to bear children. She was promised to Joseph in marriage, but had undoubtedly been closely chaperoned and sheltered. We’re not told much about her: she has a cousin Elizabeth who is from a priestly family, so Mary probably was, too. We meet Mary the mother of Jesus as a virgin -- a woman who has not done anything--at least nothing her culture values. Young women didn’t

count for much except to better family prospects through a good marriage. Mary has no husband and no children and no wealth and no status and no power.

This teenage girl from the Galilean backwater of Nazareth has been the most influential woman in the history of the Western world. I think it's worth asking ourselves why that is. She is, of course, the mother of Jesus, Emmanuel, God With Us. Joseph, the man she is engaged to, is the man who will raise and support and educate Jesus, but Joseph is not his biological father. Mary may be the most important character in our adventure who is not divine -- and there are some Christian traditions which have claimed that she herself was without sin, a perpetual virgin, and the Queen of Heaven. I'm just going to look at what's in the biblical record: which is more than enough for any adventure. I would also say that Mary, more than any other character in our adventure, is the one with whom I identify most closely. For me, and for many women, Mary is personal.

Sometimes it seems like half the women in the New Testament are named "Mary" -- that's half of those whose names we're actually told. In Luke's gospel, three women go to the tomb on Easter morning to anoint Jesus' body with spices: two of them are named Mary -- Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James. That book of Jewish baby names must have been a pretty thin volume. There are intriguing women in the gospels who are never named: the Samaritan women at the well, the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' cloak and was healed, the Syro-Phoneician woman who challenged Jesus when he refused to heal her daughter. We only get a glimpse of these women and a little bit of their stories.

Mary comes to us without a back story: she is blank slate. For me, it is her feminine courage that defines her character and makes her such an inspiration to me and to women around the world. She is visited by the angel Gabriel, and she is the only character in the Luke's narrative who has an encounter with an angel and is not terribly afraid. Maybe she's too naive to know that angels have a way of turning your life upside down. Mary is perplexed and troubled by Gabriel's greeting, and when Gabriel tells her she's going to become pregnant and give birth to the son of the Most High God, she has a question: "How can this be? I am a virgin." The angel tells her that

the Holy Spirit will come upon her, and that there is nothing that God cannot do.

And Mary replies, “I am the Lord’s servant, may it happen to me as you have said.” Mary consents to be part of the adventure. Mary says Yes to God. I can’t fathom what an amazing act of courage this is. She agrees to take leading role in a story that has no safe and predictable outcome -- but she has to know that there will be some ugly short-term consequences: embarrassment, suspicion, the end of her engagement to Joseph, being shamed by her family, public humiliation and maybe even physical punishment or death. Those are heavy things for any teen-age girl to handle, but especially when your whole identity and value is measured by your sexual purity and behavior.

There are many kinds of courage. There is the kind of courage which puts on armor and picks up a weapon and goes out to fight the enemy and risk death. Maybe the enemy is a person or an ideology, or maybe the enemy is a natural disaster. The uniform could be a soldier and the weapon a gun, or the uniform could be firefighter with the weapon of a shovel to dig a fire break. That kind of courage in the face of clear and present danger is hard to practice, but it the easiest to recognize and celebrate. Although others have shown this kind of courage on my behalf, I have never had to practice that kind of courage. But there are other, quieter kinds of courage, and many of them are deeply personal. It takes courage to stand with integrity and even compassion when you know that you may be criticized, belittled, or bullied. It takes courage to treat everyone with dignity and respect, regardless of how they treat you. This is the kind of courage I try to find for myself before every difficult conversation or meeting that I have at Creekside or in my family. Sometimes it takes courage just to show up, especially if we are carrying the weight of insecurity, anxiety, or shame. This kind of courage doesn’t make headlines or get awarded medals of honor, but I know people who exhibit this kind of courage every day, and I have deep respect for them.

The Bible doesn’t tell us how Mary and her family and village dealt with her pregnancy. I wish I knew that part of the story, but I don’t. What we are told is that soon after Gabriel’s announcement, Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is now six months pregnant. And when Mary greets Elizabeth, Elizabeth gives Mary a blessing, and

Mary sings a song of praise to God that we know as the Magnificat. You can find it in Luke 1:45-55. It's a beautiful piece of poetry; it's often been set to music, including some that we've sung this morning. But more than poetry, it's prophecy. It's not Away in a Manger, it's an anthem of victory to a God who has been faithful to the poor and the lowly. Mary, who has a great deal to be worried about and could justifiably be frightened and afraid, says, "From now on all people will call me happy." That is one of most courageous statements I have heard from any character in the Bible, and I LOVE that about this gutsy girl. Joy in the face of adversity is one of the most profound gifts of courage that God can give. In poetry and art and music Christians have portrayed Mary as meek and mild but she is SO much more than that.

I want to share with you part of a hymn text which was written by a classmate of mine at AMBS. His name is Adam Tice, and he wrote this text just before Christmas 2005, as four Christian Peacemaker Team members were held hostage in Iraq. Adam wanted to link Mary's boldness in the Magnificat to fearless peacemaking. I'll share just the first two stanzas of three which Adam has written; I have copies of the entire text on the ushers' table, and you are welcome to pick up a copy to take home and read or use as part of your Advent devotions. This has been published in Adam's collection of 50 hymn texts, *Woven into Harmony*.

**Come join in Mary's prophet-song
Of justice for the earth,
For right outgrows the fiercest wrong,
Revealing human worth --
Bound not within the wealth we crave
Or in the arms we bear,
But in the holy sign God gave:
The image that we share.**

**The "Peace on earth" which shepherds heard
Is not some fantasy.
The angels sang to greet the Word
Whose birth is victory.
The maiden Mary, not so mild,
Bore into death's domain
True God, and yet an infant child**

Who over death would reign.

This is part of the adventure that we're called to; into death's domain: Jesus' death and our own death. There are not safe and predictable outcomes, but there are courageous people who have gone before us, including this amazing young woman who gave voice to prophecy, and gave birth to its fulfillment, Jesus Christ our Lord. We're getting closer to Bethlehem each week. There's more adventure to come.