

This morning's sermon is one that is going to be a little difficult to share and possibly to hear. It is entitled, “Son of Mary”. Part of Christ's identity is wrapped up in being born of a woman living under military occupation, and during a time when women faced many kinds of threats, abuse, and risk while pregnant. I mention this disclaimer so that you may be prepared for some storytelling and rhetoric that might be challenging. I will share stories of people whom I've cared for gently over the many years, and will offer the stories with deep respect to those involved.

For millennia, it seems, that women have been the bearers of great threat to their bodies - their mental, emotional, and physical health. As well as taking on the trauma with which pregnancies and birthing often are accompanied. Not to mention the great expectations put upon mothers for their children's health and success. Mary was no exception to these circumstances, as well as being someone with great resilience and trust. She said as much in her song, her Magnificat.

Thursday this last week, we held our Longest Night service. A service intended to embrace and make room for the grief that this season brings to many in our midst...those for whom the season may not be jolly nor joyous, but sad and difficult. We offered prayers, songs, moments to light candles to bring a bit more light to a dark time, and then anointed some in prayers for healing and wholeness. But before this service, I made a pastoral visit at Loma Linda. I didn't share with anyone that day or for a few days following, that I haven't darkened those hallways in 13 years. Not since I received a call at 4am one morning in 2012 from my brother frantically telling me to meet them at Loma Linda immediately. I arrived and made my way to the nurse's station, the nurse pointed to the room, and as she did the medical team was just leaving. As the crowd disbursed from this tiny room, I saw, there slumped in a chair in the corner sat my brother. He was holding his 6-month-old daughter who had just passed, succumbing to her congenital heart defects. Her mother, his wife, weeping on the other side of the room.

The week before I was participating in the World AIDS Day service in Diamond Bar, I heard the story told by a mother whose son who had passed away from the terrible disease.

While serving as a Chaplain Resident at Children's Hospital, I was called in late one night to sit with a mother who had been left alone, no family, no support. In an unfortunate happening, her 2-year-old died earlier that night. Without the resources and support she needed, she was unable to care for her child in that moment.

And then wandering the NICCU hallways visiting with a 17-year-old mother whose child was born premature without prenatal care and facing near fatal challenges, she had been hiding her pregnancy for fear of the shame and reprimand she would face by her parents.

Being a parent is difficult at times. Being a mother, or a female in any place or moment of history can be doubly challenging simply because of the pressures of your surroundings. Mary and Elizabeth knew this all too well. I think sometimes we get too focused on, for good reason, the sweetness of the story of the visitations by the angels. We simply say that they were frightened and confused – and then all too quickly resolved with a few reassuring words, but those words romanticize the situation too much – downplay it too greatly. Mary was from the North in Nazareth, and Elizabeth from the south in Judea, they both were within Roman military zones in the Empire. To be a woman of any age, and race or citizenship other than of the Roman empire, in those spaces at that time was dangerous – people were imprisoned, tortured or worse by being hung on a cross. To be an

expectant mother during that time was possibly not a great joy, if for no other reason than to the reality check of having to birth and bring a child into that kind of world. What expectations could a mother even attempt to conjure up for her child when she couldn't be certain even she would survive. And then add to that, angels of the Lord appearing to Mary and Elizabeth, informing them that they would be giving birth to the one who would announce the new reign of God and the one who would usher in the new reign of God. It isn't just confusion sprinkled with a bit of fear, certainly not just because of the angel's visit. It is terrifying, and scary, and threatening, and nearly too impossible to believe. And yet...and yet, a mother's resilience, Mary and Elizabeth's resilience, shines in the darkest of times through this impossible situation. And now, we might be able to grasp, just a little bit better, the scenario in which Mary finds herself being visited by an angel of the Lord, and her gripping response to that angel.

*“My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.”*

With such resolve contained in one of the most terrifying revelations of all time, Mary is able to proclaim not only God's greatness, but God's promise to save God's people.

*“For you have looked with favor upon your lowly servant, and from this day forward all generations will call me blessed.”*

We can't fully grasp the intonation with which she declared this – was it offered as a question or a statement? Mary identified herself as lowly, not just a simple servant, but one of such unexpected and lower than ordinary stature – questionable even – a lesser Jew because from where she comes, a Galilean – not pure but mixed and reckless. God has looked with favor upon Mary, and she will be called blessed.

*“For you Almighty, have done great things for me, and holy is your Name. Your mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear you. You have shown strength with your arm; you have scattered the proud in their conceit; you have deposed the mighty from their thrones and raised the lowly to high places. You have filled the hungry with good things, while you have sent the rich away empty.”*

Who is she trying to convince? God or herself. She knows of God's mercy and strength - her faith has taught her this. She is proclaiming the coming kingdom of God right then. She is proclaiming the counter reign to what the world she lives in has taught her – the Roman empire. She is proclaiming that God is going to flip it on its head.

*You have come to the aid of Israel your servant, mindful of your mercy – the promise you made to our ancestors – to Sarah and Abraham and their descendants forever.”*

And now she is making a most egregious claim that could land her in jail or worse – this news from the angel, is the promise that her child will be the savior of all of Israel, but more – of ALL. Author Kelley Nikondeha in her book entitled *The First Advent in Palestine* writes, “She is told that she has found favor with God, despite all evidence to the contrary: her location, her lowly position, even her gender in a patriarchal society. She is told she will be the locus of incarnation, the place where God enters humanity. Everyday people – a

village priest and a girl from Galilee – conversed with an angel. And heard places are the places if the first advent: occupied Judea, feral Galilee, an insignificant village like Nazareth. God’s peace was unfurled where life wasn’t working, where people hurt most, where hope was on the run. Here, God declared, here, peace can – here, peace will – bloom.” And this is where things take a cosmic shift, “And her song will set a trajectory for the future, where her humiliation is transformed into incarnation in a way that foreshadows how her son’s death by imperial crucifixion, another humiliation, will be transformed by resurrection. Mary sings out a new social order that upends the status quo as advent begins to turn tables on those who benefit from the injustice of empires and their economies.” Mary isn’t just singing a lullaby; she is agreeing to giving birth to a kingdom reign that will turn the tables over on a system that isn’t about peace at all.

Mary trusted God to do the impossible, despite her fear and in spite of a world meant to crush her. So, when we read that Jesus is referred to as the Son of Mary, we aren’t meant to fixate on the terrible situation of their circumstance, but rather we are to imagine the great things God will do because Mary, a lowly woman, could no longer be defined by her station, but rather by whom God called her to be.

My sister-in-law, is now the mother of 3 biological and 2 adopted children. She is a fierce woman who will not let any system tell her how to care for and raise her children.

The mother who shared her story last week at the service, spent her life giving back into the community in major ways to support young people. She was not going to be embarrassed by her son’s passing from AIDS, but rather embrace that her son’s story would help fight stigma and shame.

The 17-year-old mother of the premature child, took a deep breath, stepped up to her child’s bedside, and nervously and decidedly accepted education on how to care for her child – quietly and proudly making a promise to herself and her child that she would break the pattern of shame and guilt.

Mary is told she will be the locus of incarnation, the place where God enters humanity. Everyday people – a village priest, a girl from Galilee, a mother whose 6-month-old passed away, a mother whose courage fought against stigma, and a young woman breaking a cycle of shame and guilt. I believe they all conversed with an angel. How about this Advent we make a shift and begin to really listen to where God’s message is being revealed to us. Let’s make a promise to share the story of incarnation entering this world in everyday people fighting against a system that would just as soon keep them down. Let us share a message of the incarnation of love in this world.

Amen!

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