

Church of the Holy Spirit, Plymouth
IV Advent Year C Homily 20 December 2015

“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.”

The gospel for this last Sunday of Advent takes us back to the events immediately after the annunciation, months before the birth in Bethlehem that we will celebrate on Christmas Eve. The angel Gabriel has told Mary that what was happening to her was God’s doing, and the angel says that God also is behind the pregnancy of her elderly relative Elizabeth. So Mary sets out for the hill country southwest of Jerusalem to take counsel with another in whose life God is intervening. And what was said to Mary by the angel is confirmed in Elizabeth’s greeting.

In this highly dramatized prologue to the gospel story, Luke records the words that Mary spoke in response to that greeting, words which most likely came from an early church hymn, the ‘*Magnificat*,’ the Song of Mary.

Like any good prologue, the words that come first in the story are usually written last. And they are placed there to set forth the themes that will follow. Thus Mary’s song, the hymn that we call the Magnificat, puts the significance of Jesus’ life on his mother’s lips, even before his birth. It sounds the messages that will be literally fleshed out in the life of Jesus.

We have, perhaps, listened to these words and heard them sung so often, that we hear only their beauty - and not the depth of their message, their declaration of reversal. We have become so familiar with the language - that we fail to hear its power and its irony.

One of my college professors, Robert McAfee Brown, wrote a brief commentary on Mary’s song. And I invited you to reflect on that song again along with a more contemporary translation, and matched with Brown’s commentary on its meaning for us:

Mary sings: ***My soul sings in gratitude... to the God who has taken notice of my lowliness.*** “Watch out! This God pays special attention to the poor, the oppressed, the enslaved. You’re looking for a Savior? Don’t look to the royal courts; look among the slaves. Don’t look to the capital city, Jerusalem; look to the boondocks, to Nazareth.”

Mary sings: ***What God has done for me will never be forgotten.*** For whom? “For Mary What’s-her-name from the wrong side of the tracks, the one with no education, no coming-out party, no executive position in the corporate structure of a multinational corporation, the one who is the object of a lot of sly talk and gossip?”

Mary sings: ***This gift is not for the proud... they have no room for it. The strong and the self-sufficient ones don’t have this awareness.*** “Those who think they have it together, those surest of themselves, those most successful in establishing confident self-images, will be scattered beyond any hope of putting it all together again.”

Mary sings: ***He has knocked tyrants off their high horses and pulled victims out of the mud.*** “Who would have thought just a few years ago that the subjugated countries of Eastern Europe would be free and the mighty Soviet Union would be no more? But if God means to raise up those without power, what does it say about our security. Mary is saying that the oppressed, the no-account, the poor, are the ones God will lift up, not necessarily you and me.”

Mary sings: ***The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold.*** “God’s way - is not that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. No, and what he offers is more significant than an across the board tax cut. God’s way is a radically different way of

understanding and reshaping all the relationships of our lives and (of) our society, and we threaten our own future and our own salvation if we go on accepting the world as it is.”

The message from this the Fourth Sunday of Advent is not the one we necessarily want to hear just days before a night marked with lovely carols and candle-lit services. But these are the words with which we are confronted this morning, words of upheaval and reversal.

In a book titled *Mary of Nazareth, Prophet of Peace* (2003) John Dear wrote:

In her song, “Mary is not a passive saint... She boldly proclaims God’s word of nonviolence to the world of violence, God’s revolution of justice to the world of injustice... Mary does not just rock the boat or shake up the status quo. She turns over the tables of culture.”

(This) “Mary is dangerous. She disturbs the culture’s complacency and stirs up trouble. From the perspective of the rebellious Mary of Nazareth, everything from this point on is different. Everything is called into question. Everything must change. Yes, she is full of grace, light, love, mercy and kindness. And she is trouble for every empire, every proponent of violence, every war-maker, every millionaire, every advocate of systemic injustice.”

The first lesson this morning came from the Book of Micah, in which the prophet says: “*From you, O Bethlehem... who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel.*” In other words, although you are small in comparison to the other tribes, out of you will come the one who will rule.

Every small congregation, every tiny parish struggling to meet its budget, needs to take these words to heart: “*from you shall come forth for me.*” A small church congregation can bring the fullness of God’s love to everyone we meet. Yes, we are all bombarded with messages of ‘bigness’ and ‘success,’ but don’t lose sight of the simplicity and the power that lies in each one of us. God knows about smallness, and God loves each and every individual, each unique person, made in God’s image and God’s likeness.

In the words of the Magnificat, God “has looked with favor on our lowliness” and “has done great things” for us. Remember, great doesn’t have to be huge or newsworthy. Great can mean touching the heart of one person, helping someone who is hurting emotionally, radiating God’s love in the community where we live. For out of you, even the smallest of congregations, will come the love of God for all.

When we gather in candlelight and quiet on Christmas Eve, we are not simply repeating some sort of ancient fairy tale.

No, we will gather to worship the one who came into a real world, a world of dictators and deaths, of pain and poverty. And as his followers, we have become his sisters and brothers. We have become joint-heirs with Christ and children of the God who promises to exalt those of low degree and fill the hungry with good things.

For he who is mighty has done great things for us. He has shown great 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 so must we.

Amen