Luke 1: 26-38; 46-55 Anita Retzlaff

NPMC

4 Advent

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**Mary’s Story: Our inheritance**

Mary’s story is an old, old story. It comes to us this year, maybe in a new way, at a time when we welcome some really good news. That is exactly what the angel brings: good news! The angel’s visit to Mary is an inspiration; it is encouraging, empowering and heart-warming. I don’t know about you – well I think that I do - but I could sure use such a story right now.

An ordinary and very young person, Mary, is visited by a messenger from God, an angel. Year after year in pageant, poetry and hymnody we rehearse this good news story: “Fear not!” Fear not! I confess that in the past, in my adult years, I have imagined that Mary’s song, her statements about God’s justice is exclusively a call to bold action and loud resistance to the inequalities in society. I have chastised myself somewhat for having been nostalgic about the unlikely scene: Mary dressed in blue and white flowing robes, surprised as all get out by an angel’s sudden appearance yet somewhat meekly submitting to the divine request to birth God-come-among-us. Yet this year I need the nostalgia, the warmth, the comfort, the safety that the “Fear not” story inspired in me as a child. Yes, it is the prelude to a dramatic salvation story and yes, it is a story about justice as Mary speaks prophetic words but this is also the affirmation, the comfort, that God is near to us and that God’s purposes will be worked out in our lives because of the manger.

So, this year I regard myself a happy and grateful beneficiary of the blue-hued Mary, the bright yellow and white angel, the promises made and the chills of hope that these inspire. This is comfort to me and it is something that I want to share with you today. I miss you all. I miss the ways in which we gather and celebrate, encourage and cheer each other. The time will come again but for now we need the warm feelings to see us through. For now, we must hold on to the “Fear not” story in a way that both settles us yet also encourages us to take on the challenge that Mary presents.

Mary’s story, her gratitude for God’s favour and protection, are not original to Mary alone. Many generations before her, Hannah, a barren woman who becomes the mother of Samuel in her later years, utters very similar words. Promising God that if she has a son, she will give him to God’s service in the temple. Hannah says, “My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God.” (1 Samuel 2:1) She goes on to speak of God raising up the poor from the dust and lifting the needy from the ash heap. “Talk no more so very proudly”, she says, “let not arrogance come from your mouth.” (2:3) You can hear the similarities. This is a theme that keeps coming round and round in the story of God’s people, Old Testament and New. Out of barrenness, trouble, despair or plain old ordinariness, God does a new and radical thing. God restores, upsets, undoes, reverses, creates. You never know for sure how God will make things right, turn things round.

So, listen to the story of Mary. If I were to begin, “Once upon a time…” you would settle in to hear a story, not a science lesson, rather an imaginative telling of something important to hear and to remember. Once upon a time there was a teenaged girl who lived in the ancient world of Palestine. She was an ordinary girl yet already engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. That is how it went in those days. Suddenly one night she awakens. An angel appears and says to her, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you…Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” Imagine what Mary was thinking. The angel continues, “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of this kingdom there will be no end.”

Mary is stunned, “How can this happen? This is not possible.” But the angel assures Mary that God **will** make it possible and that **her** son will be holy and he will be called Son of God. With that assurance Mary seems not to hesitate, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. I am ready to do what God asks of me.” Wow! End of that part of the story. It’s a great story! It is a story of possibility and the power of the word of God. It is the story of something new: new life, new relationship, unexpected mercy and whole-hearted trust.

In the story Mary isn’t afraid. She confidently and without hesitation agrees to become a mother at God’s request and will carry to term and nurture the Son of God. Mary trusts that God will be with her through all of this, finding courage in the nearness of the Divine.

It is a sign of encouragement for us also to take heart and be courageous. Yet this is a big ask for me right now, for us. There is a general feeling of anxiety in our lives. I chalk it up to two things: the Covid-19 pandemic and a political shift to a “me first” mentality spreading through many democratic countries around the world. Struggle is **in** the air. There is struggle **for** air. It seems that everywhere you turn today there lurks something threatening, frightening, unsettling and therefore we are ever-vigilant. It is exhausting. How do we stay safe when there is a raging disease in our midst, throughout the entire world, that is making it difficult to breathe, snuffing out lives? It is as if the angel of death is passing over. How do we protect ourselves? How do we resist succumbing to fear?

And in terms of our politics. I know that I am not supposed to talk about politics from the pulpit because I am certain to offend someone with a differing perspective. But politics most broadly defined is about how we live together as a society, how we take care of our most vulnerable and how we share our resources. The truth is, we are living on a continent that is experiencing overt fear-mongering such that I have ever seen in my lifetime, in countries that are not run by dictators or despots. There have been conspiracy theories all over social media, left and right, that alarm us, that make us afraid – on purpose. Anxiety is the order of the day. It has become a part of the daily ethos.

In so many places, at this time of pandemic distress, there have been demonstrations under the guise of personal freedom: “Freedom rallies” that appear to be about me first. “No government can tell me what to do. They are taking away my freedom. Your health is not my responsibility.” That we are living in the midst of a crisis in which too many of our elders are dying does not seem to matter. That we need to face some hard facts about the racist systems in our community and our own racist tendencies have been categorically dismissed by some. That there are many in our community who do not have the same access to safety because of the colour of their skin? These are some of the perplexing and complex issues dividing us in these anxious times. We have choices to make in response.

Mary’s was not a choice about wearing a mask or staying out of Walmart, hers was a choice that would change the entire course of her life and understandably, the world. She takes on God’s challenge without fear and willingly so because the Spirit of God will be present and she will not be left alone. She trusts God. An amazing encounter: and as it continues to unfold her story becomes blatantly political. Back to the social issues at hand. In the biblical tradition of making pronouncements about God’s “kindom”, about a politics that cares for all, Mary gives thanks for God’s presence and delivers a manifesto. God has and will continue to scatter the proud, bring down the powerful from their thrones, lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. (1:51-53) Here is the justice part of the story: the part that goes along with the warm feelings of safety and security. The blue-hued Mary becomes the spokesperson for a new order, a new politics, a levelled-out society, a fairer way to live.

The political task then as now, is one of cooperation rather than making threats and instilling fear of each other. There is such inequality over the face of the earth! God promises to turn things round, to raise the poor from subsistence living and starvation, to lower the status, decrease the power of those who are thoughtless about the plight of so many, to fill the stomachs and hearts of those left behind and to give a hard stop to those who think that life is just about satisfying every personal desire imaginable. This is part of Mary’s story, her call to justice - without fear. This becomes our story too, our inheritance. For the things of which Mary speaks are the very things that we hold dear as people of faith. Ours is the task of turning the world round. It is through us that God’s desire for equality is realized! Mary’s manifesto is for us to heed and to trust and to live into. And in this season of expectation and joy it begins with “Fear Not!!”

We are bequeathed the ministry of calming anxiety instead of fanning flames of distress and division. We are probably feeling more vulnerable now than we ever have before in our lifetimes yet our faith tradition calls us to speak peace in a time of upset. We have Mary’s story to embolden us. God’s presence and mercy is promised as Luke reminds us, “to the descendants of Abraham forever.” Or as the angel says of Mary’s child yet to be born, “He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (1:33) The warmth of God’s presence, the warmth of the nativity scene, is for us, forever – there is no end!

I happened upon a Facebook post a few days ago that illustrates the utter simplicity of living in a kindom of peace and mutuality. It is a quote from Pope Francis, “Rivers do not drink their own water; trees do not eat their own fruit; the sun does not shine on itself and flowers do not spread their fragrance for themselves. Living for others is a rule of nature. We are all born to help each other. No matter how difficult it is…Life is good when you are happy; but much better when others are happy because of you.” What an eloquent way of imagining how we can be as a generous world together, considering the person next to us as important as we are. The idea of making others happy is a less harsh way of talking about leveling society and bringing down dictators. I am going to tuck in that thought along with my peace-filled vision of the coming birth of Jesus.

The manger can be a uniting force. When we hold the Christmas story close and consider Mary’s story, Hannah’s story, to be our inheritance there is hope just around the corner, joy in fact and enough love to go around even into the smallest corners of our world. We have a plan if you will, a way forward without fear. So, we are given the encouragement to wait in small family groupings this Christmastime. We will wait because everyone’s health and our political life depends upon it. We will hang on to the memory of family and community traditions and will celebrate them full out next year. Open hearts are satisfied that we have enough. We can do this! We can wait and anticipate and celebrate all at the same time. Certainly, there is a crisis right now but there is also joy and laughter and hope - for the world is about to turn.

Prayer – God of the Manger, you come to us this day with promises of steadfast love and presence. We come to you and accept that gift with warm hearts. For to the world has been born a Saviour, Jesus, our Lord, friend to all. May your Spirit of Goodwill go with us now, carrying us into our Christmas celebrations, meeting our longing with Joy and Hope so that we may be the force of love that turns the world round. AMEN