

December 20, 2009/Fourth Sunday of Advent/David L. Edwards

Mary's Song of Faith

Luke 1:(26-38)39-55 *“And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”*

Luke gives us Mary as a person of faith. She becomes aware of and believes in God's purpose for her life. She perceives, through her own experience, the nature of God and how God works in the world. She responds to the presence and movement of God with openness and trust. Luke gives us Mary as a person and model of the life of faith.

In the story of Mary, we learn that the right attitude of faith is **perplexity and wonder**. Faith is not about having answers or intellectual certainty. It is not even about knowing exactly, all the time, what God is doing in our lives. Prior to our reading for today, Gabriel tells Mary what God wants to do through her life for the sake of the world (Lk. 1:26-38). Mary is perplexed [*diatarasso*: confused, baffled, even anxious] AND obedient, both at the same time. These two things go together. Mary is amazed that God wants to use her small life to do something for the world. She doesn't really understand it, but nonetheless gives herself to it. That is what faith is for us, too--wonder and obedience, perplexity and willingness. God's desire to work through our lives is something that fills us with wonder, amazement, even confusion at times.

In the end, Mary says to Gabriel: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” It is a classic statement of faith, the willingness to let our lives be a channel of God's loving activity in the world. The prophets said it: Here am I; send me! Jesus said it in the Garden of Gethsemani, facing his death: Not my will but yours, be done. It is the opening of our lives to God, the very power and source of life, to be servants of the life God wants to give to the world through us.

These days of Advent and Christmas remind us that being amazed and filled with wonder is more spiritually valuable than being firm in our beliefs and religious ideas. When our minds are full of answers, information, and self-assuredness, there is no room for God. That is the seed bed of religious bigotry and spiritual violence, not the spirit of Jesus. However, God can use our sense of wonder because it keeps us open and receptive. Then we are ready to place our lives in God's service. Here I am, your servant; let it be with me according to your word.

Central to the vision of our community has been the belief that we each are called by Jesus to bring the whole of our lives into the service of God and life. This doesn't happen overnight and none of us has fully arrived there yet. We are always becoming aware of parts of ourselves that are not open to God, that are resistant to the presence and movements of God's love and will. Our spiritual work is to open the whole of our lives, little by little, to God and the flow of God's love through us into the world. What might be blocking the way of God in and through us? Our clinging to set religious or spiritual ideas? Our hanging onto the past, and wanting to play it over and over again? Our fear? Our anger? Our hurts? Our insecurities that keep us holding onto things that we think give us security? Whatever it is, we can become aware of it and work with it gently so that we can let it go, making more room for God, for faith. Mary shows us that wonder and obedience go together. Our sense of wonder at the mystery of God's presence with us creates in us the desire, the willingness, and the courage to let our lives become more and more open to God.

The second thing about Mary's faith is something her cousin Elizabeth says to her. Elizabeth is married, getting on in years, as Luke tells us, and unable to have children, or so she thought. All of a sudden she is pregnant with John who will be the prophet/baptizer who points to Jesus as the Messiah. Mary is very young, probably no more than fifteen years old. When she becomes pregnant and maybe overwhelmed by it all, she goes to visit the older Elizabeth, perhaps to find some wisdom, support,

comfort. There is deep joy in their meeting. Elizabeth tells Mary that she is blessed because **she believed that God would do what God promised to do.**

That's another thing about faith. It is **the belief that God will do what God promises to do for us and the world.** No matter how things look now, no matter how bad the situation is, God will faithfully keep working to bring new life. "Belief" does not mean something that happens in our heads. That's what some churches have made of it. But "believing" is not rational, in that sense. The Letter to the Hebrews says that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (11:1)." Belief is something that happens in our hearts, at the core of our being. Belief is a matter of the soul, the heart, the guts, if you will. Belief is the orientation of our lives, not a head trip. It is counting on God's promise with our whole being, even when everything around us speaks against it.

We know something of this from our experience with each other as human beings. When someone tells us they are going to do something, we trust that they will do it. We know that with some people that word of promise is a sure thing. It may take some time, but we know the thing will get done. With other people, we have felt the pain and frustration when they don't carry through with what was promised.

Central to the life of faith is the deep belief that God will do what God has promised to do for the world. No matter how things look now, whether we see it in our lifetime or not, we believe that God is the deep, often hidden momentum of life that will bring to the world the reign of justice, compassion, mercy, and peace. We believe that God's love is more powerful than hate or greed or fear. We are not naïve about the realities of human violence or injustice. We just live our lives out of the belief that these things are contrary to God's will and have no future. This frees us to live without anxiety, fear, or despair.

The third thing about Mary's faith is that now she **celebrates what God has already done and what will be completed.** Her song ("canticle" is the fancy church word) expresses the paradoxical nature of the life of faith. What God wants for the world has already been accomplished. It is a done deal, and yet it is to be fully completed.

Mary sings a song of praise because she sees her life as blessed. It is blessed because she has been called and given a way to participate in God's bringing of new life to the world. Mary sees how her own small life is connected to the life of the world, that her life is not only a blessing to her but to many people. Mary, who as far as we know was nobody special, and a pregnant teen at that, is to be the the channel of a whole new era of God's loving of the world.

What God has done in Mary's life is what God is doing in and for the whole world. The whole destructive and unjust order of human life has been reversed. Human power, arrogance, violence, and injustice are surely present, but it is all doomed. It is all based on illusions, not the deepest nature of reality. God, the very Power that is at the heart of the universe, is on the side of the lowly, the humble, those who are without power, the hungry and the poor. God's power and movement are in those who are truly peacemakers, not those who perpetuate and escalate war. The life of this child Mary is carrying is and will be about the true nature of reality. The way, the truth, and the life has dawned and been made utterly clear.

I was perplexed and became increasingly unsettled by the giving of the Nobel Peace Prize to President Obama, who has chosen to escalate the war in Afghanistan. Greg Mortenson was also a Nobel Peace Prize nominee. Mortenson, as you may know, founded the Central Asia Institute which is responsible for building hundreds of schools in the most remote parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan, most of them for girls. [www.ikat.org] "Educate girls, change the world," is one of their themes. Tribal leaders continue to come to CAI to beg for help in building schools in their villages, and they pledge to defend these schools with their lives. Peace through education. Books instead of bombs. Rural villages finding hope as their children receive education. This is the way of peace, not the other. When Mortenson's friends expressed their deep disappointment at the announcement of the Nobel Prize, Mortenson's response was, "I'm pretty busy right now." In other words, he felt it a relief not to have

that further distraction from his work. In all of this I saw so clearly the truth of Mary's song. God's presence is in the work of true peace, of lifting up the lowly, of casting down the proud, of feeding the hungry and sending the wealthy away empty-handed. It is on the side of real peace, not war. The ways of true life are abundantly clear for us, if we only see through the distractions, the superficial, the illusions we are fed.

This is the already of faith. God has already turned the tables and brought in the kingdom. That is what we celebrate at Christmas time. It can only be celebrated with joy, as a gift, a gracious event of God's redeeming love. But there is also the not yet of faith, God's call to us in Jesus to be part of the unfolding of that kingdom, that new order of things, to make our lives instruments of God's love and will. The life of faith affirms both the already and the not yet of God's actions.

I offer this prayer for us today and through the coming days of Chrstitmastide:

That each of us in some way will touch again the wonder of faith that is deeper than the workings of our minds.

That we will experience afresh the obedience of faith, the desire to let our lives be the instruments of God's loving will.

That we will rediscover the faith that comes from knowing at the core of our being that God will accomplish what God desires for the world.

That we will touch the joy that comes from knowing God has already made all things new.

And that each of us will become aware of the ways God is calling us to be part of the continuing unfolding of the way, the truth, and the life that has decisively dawned in Jesus, which he embodied and which we discover together as we follow him.