

December 23, 2012 / 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 model of faith, not in the sense that we should try to be like Mary. We must not try to be like anyone other than our own, real selves, the persons God created us to be. The spiritual life, the life of faith, is about embracing our own precious lives as gifts from God and channels of God's love.

There are things, however, about Mary's spirit, as portrayed in the story, that we can touch in ourselves, within the uniqueness of our own lives.

Mary shows us that the most fruitful attitude of faith is **wonder**, even **perplexity**. The other day I had a conversation with a scientist friend at the YMCA. We were chatting about spirituality and science. He said that for scientists, the only way to learn about the nature of things is to have a completely open mind, not committed to certain results or answers. I said that Buddhism says the same thing, that we need to have a “don't know” mind. Mary has a “don't know” mind. She is open, receptive, not closed down. I think this is an important part of the childlike spirit Jesus says we must have if we are to enter the kingdom of God, if we are to see what it is about.

Faith is not about having intellectual certainty. Faith is not even about understanding exactly what God is doing in our lives. Prior to our reading for today, Gabriel tells Mary what God wants to do through her 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 understand it, but 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 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 the essential statement of faith, the willingness to let our lives be channels of God's loving activity in the world. The prophets said it: Here am I; send me!

Jesus said in the Garden of Gethsemane, 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, so that we can be servants, channels, of what God wants to give to the world through us.

Advent and Christmas is a time to be reminded that being amazed and filled with wonder is more spiritually valuable than clinging firmly to beliefs and religious ideas. This, of course, is the exact opposite of what we see in most public manifestations of religion these days. When our minds are full of answers, information, and self-assuredness, there is no room for God. It is the seed bed of religious bigotry and spiritual violence, not the spirit of Jesus. God can use our sense of wonder because it keeps us open and receptive to the sacred dimension of life. 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 God in Jesus to bring the whole of our lives into the service of God and life. This does not happen overnight, and none of us has fully arrived there yet. We are always becoming aware of parts of ourselves that are not open, 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 is 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 clinging to possessions, ideas, people? Whatever it is, through our inward journey work, we can become aware of it and begin to find the ways to 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. John gives his mother a good kick when he hears Mary's greeting; even in the womb, John recognizes Jesus as the "one of God". 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. No matter how things look now, no matter how bad the situation is, God faithfully keeps working in the depths, beyond our view, to bring new life. "Belief" does not mean something in our heads. 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.

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, hidden essence and energy of life that is bringing 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 simply live our lives out of the belief that these things are contrary to the purposes of life 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 ("canticule") 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, greed, 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. 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.

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 Chrsitmastide:

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. And that we will know the joy of clearing out of our lives and inner lives those things that clutter and choke God's spirit in us.

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, in spite of how things look at any given time.

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

And that each of us will become more clearly 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.