

December 20, 2015 / 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. There are things about Mary, as portrayed in the story, that we can touch in ourselves, that have to do with the nature of the life of faith, the spiritual life.

First, **Mary shows us that the most fruitful attitude of faith is wonder, even perplexity.** I recall a conversation with a scientist friend. We were discussing 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, and certainly not to a particular political view. I remarked that Buddhism says the same thing, that we need to have a "don't know" mind, a mind open and receptive. Mary has a "don't know" mind. She is open, not closed down. I think this is part of the childlike spirit or mind Jesus says we must have if we are to enter the kingdom of God, if we are to understand how to live life as God created it to be lived.

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, the angel Gabriel tells Mary what God wants to do through her for the sake of the world (1:26-38). Mary is perplexed [*diatarasso*: confused, baffled, even anxious] AND obedient, all 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 does not understand it, but gives herself to it. That is what faith is for us, too--wonder and obedience, perplexity and willingness, prayerful awe and service.

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 attitude 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 it 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 firmly holding onto beliefs and religious ideas. This is the exact opposite of what we see in most public manifestations of religion these days. When our minds are full of answers and self-assuredness, there is no room for God. It is the seed bed of bigotry and violence, not the spirit of Jesus. God can use our sense of wonder because it keeps us open and receptive to the very power of life.

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? Our desire to control things and people? Our fear? Our anger? Our hurts? Our clinging to material or financial security, to possessions that we think give our lives meaning? In these days of transition related to my retirement, the resistance may be the temptation, out of anxiousness, to want to control how things will go, to focus too much on organizational matters, and not allow space and room for letting God lead you. Whatever it is, through our inward journey work, we can become aware of it and begin to work with letting it go, untangling the knots, making more and 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 fully channels of God's love.

**The second thing about Mary has to do with Mary's visit to Elizabeth.** Consider their relationship, their meeting, and what transpired between them. It was certainly the shared joy of being pregnant. There cannot be a deeper joy than when two women, both of whom are going to give birth, get together! Yet there is more. They experience and perceive in themselves and one another the presence and activity of something bigger than themselves. Mary has rushed to her cousin Elizabeth, filled with excitement and perplexity. She does not really know what is going on. When she enters Elizabeth's house, Elizabeth's baby, who is John, the one who will baptize Jesus and thus launch his ministry, leaps in her womb. Maybe the baby gives her a good kick! The life in her, which is God's doing, recognizes the life in Mary, which is also God's doing.

Think about that! **Mary and Elizabeth see in themselves and in one another the presence and activity of God.** Elizabeth tells Mary that she is the mother of "my Lord" and that she is blessed among all women. Something special is happening in and through her life for the good of the whole world. How does Elizabeth know this? Because she recognizes in herself something God is doing. THAT is what I saw as though for the first time in this familiar text. What goes on between Elizabeth and Mary is what we are about as a community. Our being together is not just for enjoying each other's' company! We are a called community (*ekklesia*), called together to be a dwelling place for God's love. We are to grow in our ability to see in ourselves and one another God's presence and activity in and for the world.

This is what we mean when we talk about call and gifts. We are to know within ourselves and to perceive within each other the particular ways God is working, through our unique callings and gifts, to bring new life to the world. This is the exciting thing about this community. It is a place, a fellowship, in which, if we are faithful to it, each person can discover her or his calling, what God is seeking to do through him or her, and affirm and exercise the gifts God has given each of us to use for the nurturing and nourishing of life around us.

What I want to say, in light of this story, is that each of us has a womb! Yes, fellows, we also have a womb! It is the womb of our deepest, most

authentic self. It is where we meet God and God meets us, where we know our connectedness to God and sense the leading of God's spirit in our lives. It is where we dream the dreams of God for the life of God's world, and see the particular ways each of us is created and called to live out a part of that dream. The womb is where some ministry is born in us, a ministry of God's love for the world, for the meeting of some need in those around us and in the life of the world. So, this story of Mary and Elizabeth is not just for women! It is for all of us.

Let me give an example. A few months ago, after I had announced my retirement, all sorts of wonderful things began to happen. Some who had been pondering a membership commitment felt that this was the time, and came forward to make their commitments. There were those two Sundays when we were so privileged to have Stephanie and Tiona share their lives with us, in such a powerful way. Knowing that the community would need to take responsibility for its weekly worship, some stepped forward to begin already to assume that responsibility. So, there have been some Sundays when all I had to do was sit in my corner and play music with our little group of musicians who offer their gifts each Sunday, and then give the sermon when it was time. The readings, the prayers, were taken care of, and beautifully so. I felt I had really worshiped through the gifts and the sharing of responsibility of our newer members. I have felt a tremendous sense of God's spirit in myself and our community. This is what I have meant when I have said that you have everything you need, right now, to be the Church of the Covenant! It is what happens when we as a community keep in mind that our main work is about calling and gifts, and about seeing in one another the births that are coming to be, of our authentic self, of the movements of God's spirit in and among us.

**The third thing about Mary's faith is the song she sings in response to Elizabeth's words to her, a song of what God has already done and is doing in the world.** Her song, or canticle, expresses the paradoxical nature of the life of faith. What God wants for the world has already been accomplished. It is already the inherent, truest nature of things. It is a done deal. And yet, it is

also being fully completed.

Mary experiences her own small life being connected to the life of the world, that her life is not only a blessing to her but to others. 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 always doing in and for the whole world. The whole destructive and unjust order of human life has been and will always be reversed. Human power, arrogance, greed, violence, and injustice are inherently doomed. It is all based on illusions, not the true 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, and saturate the world with weapons. 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. Only what is just, compassionate, merciful, peaceable has grounding in Reality, in God. The rest is false, pretentious, a lie. 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 active presence in the world.

It is possible that Luke incorporated this canticle from circles of what were called the "Anawim", the poor ones. These were small communities of followers of Jesus who were not only in a state of poverty, but continued to choose poverty over the false values of life around them—wealth, status, power. They took Jesus' teachings seriously—Blessed are the poor, and the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:3; Luke 6:20). The biblical scholar Raymond Brown says this of the Anawim: "[They were those] who could not trust in their own strength but had to rely in utter confidence upon God: the poor, the sick, the downtrodden, the widows and orphans. The opposite of the Anawim were not

simply the rich, but the proud and self-sufficient who showed no need of God or God's help." (THE BIRTH OF THE MESSIAH, p. 351) Mary represents the Anawim, the poor ones. What God was doing in her life—lifting up the lowly and bringing down the wealthy and proud—God was also doing throughout the world.

We come to this last Sunday in Advent, the threshold of Christmas, and when Mary opens her mouth to sing a song about this baby she is carrying, we are ready for a sweet little lullaby about the baby Jesus. And what do we get? A song of protest and liberation, a song announcing how and where God's love is present and working in the world—not with the wealthy and powerful, but with the poor and humble; not with the proud and arrogant, those who "look down on others because they do not look up to God", as Raymond Brown writes (p. 337), but with those who are lowly (*tapeinos*=humble, poor, meek and mild, down-hearted), those whose lives are empty of material and spiritual prosperity, whose lives are open to and trusting of God in all things. Mary's song is celebrating the reality of things now and of things to come, because God is the power of love that is turning the world upside down, lifting up the lowly and bringing down (*kathaireo*=pull down, overthrow) the powerful, filling the hungry with good things and sending the wealthy away empty-handed.

This Advent and Christmas, I pray that we as a community may continue to be characterized by wonder and by servanthood; that we may always be a community in which persons are able come into their authentic, true selves, and in which our primary work is always to see in ourselves and one another the presence and activity of God, God's calling and gifts; and that we may know in the world and in ourselves the God who is with the poor and poor in spirit, the God who is turning things upside down so that all may have abundant life. That is how God is with us, and how we are to be with others, the world, and ourselves.