

December 24, 2017  
Advent 4  
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:46b-55; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38  
Mary, Theotokos – The God Bearer  
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Fellow Ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ,  
Grace to you and peace from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This has been a confusing Advent Season. The last time this happened was 2006, eleven years ago. On this day, December 24<sup>th</sup>, the world around us is frantically finalizing Christmas plans while we continue to wait, with Mary for the birth of the Savior of the world. This morning is Advent Four. It is Mary's day!

Mary! A sweet teenage virgin, clueless to the real world. Not fully understanding what she was getting into she was subjugated to God's will. We sing of her as meek, mild, mindless. Some would even say she was in a terrible relationship with a man much older than she. Recently, her story was equated with the abusive actions of an older man against a teenage girl.

There is much misunderstanding and misinformation about Mary. She gets only passing attention in the salvation story. But, today is her day. Today we focus on the favored one of God most high. Many artists depict the angel kneeling, in recognition of the honor given to Mary. The angel greets Mary with the reverence and deference.

Mary is but one in a long line of biblical women who participate in the history of salvation. Sarah is in her tent, baking. Rachel is drawing water at the well. Bathsheba is taking a bath. Martha is fussing in the kitchen. There is a key difference in Mary's story.

We find no evidence of domestic work done by her. We don't hear of her cooking, cleaning, doing laundry. We find her, instead on journeys that are risky and dangerous.

Luke's gospel is the only one in which Mary's story appears. There is nothing written here that would lead us to think of Mary as submissive or immature. Recognizing her openness to God's will is a more faithful way to understand this young woman, this God-bearer.

The angel Gabriel hails her as the favored one and announces that "the Lord is with you". The gospel writer tells us she was perplexed by his words. That's understandable. She wonders "what sort of greeting" this might be. What might it mean to "find favor with God". Our modern understanding of "favor" might lead us to believe that being favored by God would lead to a tranquil life, insulated from turmoil and pain, comfortable means, enough to eat, a roof over our heads.

Mary's favor with God, however, exposed her to the threat of social criticism, the dangers of a difficult journey under less than ideal circumstances, facing the birth of her first child in a foreign environment. As the child grew, did her son, the result of this divine favor remain a riddle to her? She saw friends, neighbors and even family members treat him with hostility. She endured watching him launch on a collision course with religious leaders. She stood by as the political leaders clashed with religious leaders to arrest, try and condemn her son. She suffered his humiliating execution and burial.

As she pondered all these things, did she also ponder the angel's greeting "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God"? Mary is not afraid. She is perplexed! But she is not afraid.

Her song, the song we sang moments ago and will sing again at the conclusion of this message, her song, known as The Magnificat is a political manifesto. She delivers it publicly, in the home of an official temple priest who is married to her cousin Elizabeth . . . also a bold woman, pregnant with John the Baptist.

Mary's manifesto makes bold statements about injustices that the powerful and privileged deliver to the poor and lowly, including herself. She is a young woman who knows the state of her world and makes no apology for "telling it like it is".

Let's be clear, Luke does not tell us her age. We have made those assumptions over the centuries, assumptions that overshadow the story of bold woman, chosen by God because of her boldness.

Her boldness is that she speaks God's truth to power: She proclaims that it is God's will to bring the mighty down from their thrones; to scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts; to fill the hungry with good things while sending the rich away empty.

She is well-spoken, wise and gritty. She demonstrates her grit when she sets out alone, like the prophets before her on the first of her journeys, a visit to Elizabeth.

She will journey to Bethlehem, to Egypt and back, to Jerusalem where first she will see her adolescent son's power and wisdom she will journey there again to see him crucified.

She shows her grit when she gives birth in a barn, lies down with animals, welcomes smelly shepherds in the middle of the night. She is no helpless, submissive or foolish young girl. She is strong, determined and wise. She calls to us, especially to women across the centuries to speak out for God's justice. Justice that is groaning to be born into this world.

The angel greets her with reverence as the favored one of God. The mother of Jesus. She is known as Theotokos, the God bearer. "We are all called to be mothers of God – for God is always waiting to be born", says Meister Eckart, a 13<sup>th</sup> century German mystic.

The mystery of the incarnation of Jesus the Christ from the womb of a woman who boldly said yes to God's call to give birth to the Son of God two thousand years ago is our inspiration to give birth to God's Son in our time and culture. To give birth to justice for the poor and the oppressed. To bring the mighty down from their thrones. We are the bearers of the Good News of Jesus Christ to the lowly, the ones who don't matter. Every liturgy is the church's chance to sing Mary's song.

The church is always a good news gathering where the humble are welcomed, the hungry are fed. AND where the powerful are also welcomed. It is in the act of humbly receiving God's grace that we are made equal. The powerful are brought low and the lowly are lifted up at every communion table. So, on this day, we sing together the manifesto of the God-bearer, this overtly political statement first sung by a wise, gritty and favored woman of God.

Please stand as you are able and join your voices with that of Mary:

My soul proclaims your greatness, oh God!