

The Forgotten Prophet

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Advent Sermon
December 9, 2018

Prayer of Illumination

Please pray with me.

Living God, help us to hear your Word
so that we may truly understand;
that, through understanding, we may believe;
and by believing, we may follow your way,
and seek to glorify and honor you in all that we do. **Amen.**

Scripture Reading

Luke 1:39-42, 46-56
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Listen for a word from God for you today.

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,
40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb.
And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit
42 and she exclaimed with a loud cry,

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

[...]

46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is God's name name.

50 God's mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

51 God has shown strength with his arm;

God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

53 God has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

54 God has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

56 And Mary remained with [Elizabeth] about three months
and then returned to her home.

The Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Introduction

As you can see, I am not Patrick - buuuuuut my name is also Reverend Heery. It gets confusing. If people call us asking for “Reverend Heery,” we now have to answer, “Him or her?” Though most of you know me, you may not know my story. And I am thrilled for this opportunity to get to know you all a little better. (It is also Patrick’s birthday today, and I can think of no better birthday present than to save him from having to write a sermon for this morning!)

My calling to ministry has blessed me with some amazingly diverse experiences - remarkably, God’s call has taken me from the wilds of Yellowstone National Park to living among the homeless in a big city; I have sat with dying patients in a hospice and comforted the grieving families of organ donors; and I have also played silly games and taught important life lessons to teenagers in a youth group.

Perhaps my most unique ministry, however, was when I served alongside the chaplain at Churchill Downs in Louisville - the home of the Kentucky Derby.

Nestled behind the barns and betting booths on the backside of Churchill, there’s a chapel. It serves some of the 600 men and women who live and work at the track – jockeys, trainers, exercise riders, stablehands. It was a ministry unlike anything else that I’ve ever experienced. Here on the backside of the racetrack, in this little chapel, Catholics and Baptists, Pentecostals and Presbyterians, and every kind of Christian in between would all gather together for worship. Beautifully, we were able to put our denominational differences aside enough so that we all could come together and worship God. However, there was one sticking point that almost tore the chapel apart – Mary...

You see, most of the backside workers are Hispanic immigrants, and most of them are Catholic. And a few years before my time there, many of these Catholic workers wanted to have a statue of Mary placed in the sanctuary. The chaplain, however, felt that Mary would make the chapel feel too distinctively Catholic, when the ministry’s goal is to be nondenominational. So he refused.

Outraged, many of the Catholic congregants boycotted the chapel. In protest, they posted flyers that compared the chaplain to the innkeeper who declared that there was no room at the inn.

Eventually, the chaplain compromised by building a gazebo just outside of the chapel for Mary’s statue to be housed. And for the most part, this controversy finally died down. Yet, it’s amazing to me. That for all of our many differences, *this* is the sticking point that threatened to tear the Christians of Churchill apart.

The Trouble in the World – Mary Worshipped and Mary Ignored

Perhaps it shouldn't have been so surprising. This debate over Mary is nothing new, of course.

For Catholics, Mary has always been significant. Historically, Mary's theological importance grew during the Middle Ages. During that time, while the church's leadership became more and more distant from the people, Mary became an important part of the prayer lives of the common people, because she was seen as someone who could empathize with them. From then on, in the councils of the Church through the centuries, as Mary gained more and more importance, she was gradually granted more and more supernatural qualities. And by now, in the Catholic faith Mary is viewed almost as a Co-Redeemer with Christ, acting as a kind of go-between with us on earth and with God in heaven.

Meanwhile, we Protestants have long railed against this practice. But I worry that we may have taken this critique too far in the other direction. For many Protestants, Mary was just a peasant woman chosen to bring Jesus into the world. We reduce her status simply to her biological role as Jesus' mother. She is mentioned so infrequently in our churches that, until Christmastime, we can easily forget her completely. She becomes relegated to the nativity set, and when Christmas is done, she is simply packed away again until the next year.

So caught in the crossfire, who is this elusive woman who is almost worshiped by some and almost completely ignored by others? This may sound provocative, but honestly, both worshipping Mary and ignoring Mary do the exact same thing – *both* forget who Mary actually was. *Both* overly simplify her. *Both* reduce her story to someone who either was entirely miraculous or who was too forgettably human. But most importantly *both* silence Mary's prophetic voice...

The Trouble in the Text – Submissive or Subversive?

Whether we worship Mary or we ignore Mary, we tend to view her in the same way – sweet, submissive, passive, meek, mild.

Every single year we sing the same songs about how “gentle Mary meekly bowed her head” when she heard Gabriel's news. Song after song gives this same impression. Yet, none of these words are actually found in the Bible. Nowhere does it say that Mary was meek and mild!

And every single year we ask the same questions -

Mary, did you know
that your Baby Boy is Lord of all creation?
Mary, did you know

that your Baby Boy would one day rule the nations?
Mary, did you know
that the sleeping Child you're holding is the Great, I Am?

The answer is, YES! Yes, Mary knew!

If you look closer in the actual biblical story, Mary's response to the angel's strange request is not one of benign resignation. Instead, she celebrates. She bursts into song. And powerfully, the song she sings is about an end to tyranny and oppression. No, Mary isn't passive. Mary wasn't submissive... Mary was subversive!

Prophetically, she proclaims that the powerful will be brought down. Prophetically, she reassures us that the hungry will be fed. Prophetically, she announces that the rich will be sent away with nothing. Mary praises a God who would choose her – a poor, marginalized, Jewish, teenage, peasant girl – to be the bearer of the Son of God. And because of this, she knows that the world will be turned upside down.

Mary is a prophet...

Mary's story mirrors the whole Christmas story. Right now I want you to take a step back. Forget your assumptions. Read it all again as if it were the very first time. And notice... the whole story of Christmas is not so meek and mild either. Instead, it is a subversive story, a prophetic story.

Think about it. After Mary's prophesy, we learn that an oppressive Roman empire is seeking to extend its control and tax the Jewish people through a census. A new king is born, which his people hope will rise up and overthrow these oppressors and liberate their people. Yet, a despotic ruler sees Jesus as a potential threat, and in his desperate desire to hold onto his power, he slaughters hundreds of innocent children. This genocide forces Jesus' family to flee to Egypt as political refugees. The actual story of Christmas is a long way from the "Little Lord Jesus," so gentle, meek and mild, that he doesn't cry in his manger bed.

And yet, over time, this Christmas story and Mary's story have been romanticized and sentimentalized. They were "rebranded." They were tamed. A sweet story is less dangerous than a prophetic story. A sweet story is easier to dismiss. A sweet story is easier to silence. A sweet story is easy to forget.

In the same way, when we dismiss Mary simply as being sweet or when we treat her as being so miraculous that she is barely human, we forget her true power. Her prophetic voice is silenced. And she is forgotten. This Christmas we remember...

52 God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

53 God has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

54 God has helped his servant Israel...

55 according to the promise God made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

The Hope in the World – Women Preaching from the Pulpit and the Power of Every Voice

It is a profound moment for me to preach Mary's prophetic words from the pulpit this morning. As a woman, I feel blessed to be able to do something today that she herself was never given the opportunity to do. It's amazing really. Not long ago, my preaching to you today would not have been possible. And in some traditions, it still is not possible. Yet, I am blessed to bear the legacy of Mary and of all the many women who have come before me.

And yet, for as far as we have already come, this Advent season we are still waiting for a savior, we still struggle to stand against tyranny and oppression, we still wait for the hungry to be fed, we still work for God's justice to be realized here on earth. This world needs to hear a prophetic voice. And Mary reminds us of the power of every voice. She was once a lowly, teenage girl, a very small person in a very large empire. And yet, God chose *her*. Not some queen or a princess. Not someone powerful, famous, or rich. No, God chose *her*. God spoke through *her*. And miraculously, God asked *her* to bear the Savior of the world.

So too, God speaks through *you*. God has chosen *you*. And while you may think that you are just a very small person in a very large world and that no one would care or remember what you have to say, Mary reminds us that *your voice matters. Every voice matters.*

Conclusion –

So in this way, Mary could still divide us. Or, instead, Mary could ultimately be the one who brings us together. If we dare to remember her for who she truly was, if we are bold enough to hear her voice, then I believe that Mary's message has the power to unite us all. This Christmas may we remember...

Amen.