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Advent 4 C , December 22, 2024

“Blessed Among Women”

Read: Luke 1: 39–56 and/or Memorize: Luke 1: 42

In a culture in which women were considered to be of no value, the Gospel of Luke gives us a whole new perspective on women from the point of view of the New Kingdom that Jesus is bringing. Of all the books in the New Testament, Luke’s book is all about women. It almost reads as if a woman might have written it, except that Luke specifically tells us he wrote it.

It contains intimate details, which hardly would've occurred to a man. It begins with the birth of John the Baptist, focusing on his mother, Elizabeth. The next section is Mary’s story. To her we will shortly return.

Another woman enters the picture in Mary’s story, a prophetess named, Anna. When the baby Jesus is brought to the temple, she spoke of the child to all who would listen. When that boy Jesus, was found by his parents at the temple, talking with and questioning the learned doctors at about the age of 12 or 13, the only person Luke quotes is his mother, Mary.

Many of Luke’s stories from Jesus’ ministry are about women: the woman who is a sinner, the woman who wouldn’t give up, the widow of Nain, the bent over woman, and the widow who gave her mighty mites. At the resurrection, it was only women, who had the faith to go to the grave.

The text even names some of them: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, the mother of Jesus, along with other women with them. It is Luke again who, alone tells us, that when the women told the disciples about the empty tomb, the men assumed it was an idle tale and did not believe them. All of this, mind you, all this activity, is carried out by women, in a culture in which women are often discounted.

The central character in the birth narrative, only told by Luke, is the person closest to that event, Mary. There have been various thoughts and images suggested about Mary . One presents her as this virgin queen. She is the little girl, overwhelmed by circumstances far beyond her control. A simple, rural and unlettered child, that God has chosen to be the vessel of his grace.

On the other hand, there is another view of Mary, way more faithful to the text of Luke, I believe. Here we find a determined, strong women; a model for all women, a woman of power and influence: educated, sharp, committed. It is this resourceful, competent, clear - minded woman and mother, from whom Jesus learns much of what He knew about God's will for Himself and for His world. It is a woman, blessed.

The key to this understanding of Mary comes from the words and the heart of today's text. Some of you may know it already. It is a poem, known by the Latin translation of its first words, the "Magnificat." It means "My soul magnifies the Lord."

So, in this book, which focuses so much on women, what do we know about Mary? The answer to that is not very much. We know the town where she lived, a dusty village in the north, named Nazareth. Luke tells us nothing about her family. Apparently, they were nobodies from nowhere. Like many young women, she was pledged for marriage at a very young age to a carpenter named Joseph, whose family had come from the south. Specifically, Bethlehem, the City of David.

Beyond that, we know that Joseph is a faithful, courageous, loyal husband and father, who protects his little family, taking them out of harm's way, when Herod the king, in one of his rages, seeks to destroy the infants of Bethlehem. But there is not one word spoken by Joseph in the whole Gospel of Luke or any mention of what he thought about anything.

We know that Mary receives a visit from a messenger, imaged for us as the angel, Gabriel. He tells her not to be afraid when she finds that she is pregnant. He also tells her that she is chosen, favored to play an important role in history.

At first, the text tells us, "She was greatly troubled." I can only imagine she was. She lived in a culture that demanded that she be stoned, if she became pregnant outside of marriage. On the other hand, it's not every day that a mother is told that the child she is carrying is to be called, "the Son of the Most High." Nor do many women hear that their child is destined to be a king and sit on the throne of David forever. So, yes, it makes sense that she is troubled.

When she is certain of her pregnancy, Mary, this very young woman, does a very feminine thing. She seeks out another woman to talk to. She hears, with great joy, that her cousin, Elizabeth, a much older woman, who had been barren for years, is now pregnant also. So, Mary makes the very long trek south to the hill country of Judah to visit her friend and cousin. She stays with Elizabeth and her husband for three months.

A veil is placed over the details of their conversations. We know nothing about what they say to each other daily. It's likely that if Mary and Elizabeth had been men, the visit might've

been a day or less, maybe even just a few hours. Men are less inclined to talk intimately with each other. We could talk a lot about the reasons why that is, but that would, in essence, divert us from the story about the women, so we won't digress.

Once again, the story takes a twist from a women's view. As soon as Elizabeth sees Mary, she realizes something important has happened to her. That she has found favor with God and "is blessed among all women," as she says so directly to Mary . Women have this way of knowing things and supporting one another, often cooperating, which often lies at the heart of their important conversations, rather than competing over who is stronger, richer or smarter.

Whatever is the nature of this visit, the result of it, heard from Mary's lips, is anything but a song of a frightened, sweet, ignorant, submissive, girl. She sings: "My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior."

This is not the first time a song like this has been sung. Another woman, named Hannah, sang a very similar song when she realized she was pregnant. Her child, too, would change the direction of Israel. She would name him Samuel, that is the name God told her to give him. He would ultimately anoint King David.

Here is Hannah's song:

My heart exalts in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in the Lord.
The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
The Lord makes the poor rich,
he brings low, he also exalts.
He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy.

Ten centuries later, Mary also would reflect her feelings about what the Lord has done:

He has shown strength with his arm,
he has scattered the proud ...
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.

Could Mary have known Hannah's song? If so, she was not that illiterate, simple girl we've pictured in the telling of this story many times. Educated, knowledgeable about the scriptures, aware of the dynamics of history and tuned into the willing plan of God, that's the Mary of the Magnificat.

Perhaps, like me, you have wondered where Jesus got His view of the world? How is it He identified with the poor, had such a difficult time with the mighty? Why was He so unmasculine in his rejection of the sword, of violence, as the way of the future, of competition as the source of power and wealth?

Where did He get the idea that this was to be the lynchpin of his life; that abundance did not lie in doing well but in doing good? Where did He come upon the notion that God demanded compassion, gentleness and humility; that the meek would inherit the earth, the merciful, obtain mercy, the pure in heart, see God, and the peacemakers be called God's children?

Think about Mary's song, and you may very well discover where Jesus got His image of the world and of the will of God. He got it, like most of us, men and women alike, at the knee of His mother. Could it be these were the things Mary and Elizabeth talked about for three months?

Nearing the end of World War II, two of the most powerful men in the world met on a ship off the coast of Malta. They were Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. There, they discussed big things, the things of important influence. Perhaps these great men did not have an iota of the influence on the world that these two simple women, who met for three months at Elizabeth's home, somewhere in the hill country of Judah to talk did?

From their long conversations, likely comes a song, a reflection of Hannah's song of long before them, almost 1,000 years. From that song has come some of the ethic of Jesus of Nazareth, Prince of Peace and Savior of the world.

"Blessed are you, Mary, blessed are you among all women. And blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus," and blessed are those who hear Him, believe Him, and follow Him in the ways of peace and justice.

Count me in: What will you do to reflect the ethic of Jesus in your relationships with others?