

## BIRTHING HOPE

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### Luke 1:46-55

In our lectionary readings today, we get the great protest Song of Mary, that she sings as she is in the process of *becoming* mother of Jesus. From the first chapter of the gospel of Luke:

My soul magnifies the Lord (this is an active verb, and it implies that God is enhanced by this connection with Mary) My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior (Liberator), the Beloved has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. (and the Greek here is suggesting not so much humility, as suffering) Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is the name. God's mercy is for those who fear (who reverence) God, from generation to generation. The Holy One has shown strength... scattered the proud... brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly... filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has helped God's servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy. Or as a different translation puts it: God has piled on the mercies, piled them high... exactly as God promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now." Now!

Last month we concluded part 1 of our Sunday Seminar series, "Becoming the Beloved Community," on race, privilege and faith. This has been an "apocalyptic" journey, which is to say profoundly revealing of a world and a reality that most of us did not begin to understand. It all coincided with what has turned out to be an apocalyptic—again, deeply revealing—chapter in our nation's history. White supremacy and abusive power is on full and toxic display. It is a good time to be reminded that "beloved community," that great dream of Martin Luther King, Jr., is not some utopian ideal; King understood it as a concrete and achievable reality made possible whenever ordinary people come together to embody love, justice and peace.

One of our most revealing visuals was a video clip called "the privilege walk." It shows a roomful of diverse people who start out in a line holding hands, a community of sorts. Participants are then asked a series of 40 questions and invited to move in response. One step forward for each yes to questions like: is English your first language, do both parents have a college degree, can you find Band Aids that match your skin tone, can you make mistakes and not have them attributed to your race or gender, when trouble occurs, can you call the police without thinking twice. One step back for each yes to questions like: have you ever been profiled by someone using stereotypes, do you live in an area with crime and drug activity, have you ever gone to bed hungry, have you ever been spoken over because you could not articulate your thoughts loudly or quickly enough. Forward and backward, the video illustrates a community disintegrate. At the end, some people are openly distraught, especially the ones in the way, way front, the place of greatest privilege -- largely straight, white, men. The people in the back—women, of color—seem much less surprised; the view from the back of the room is a whole lot more clear, after all. Listening to those folks in the back is an essential first step in becoming "beloved community."

Which brings us to back to Mary. As a poor, unwed, woman, with brown skin, and the wrong religion, who turns up with a dubious pregnancy—she'd be close to the very back of that room. And it is precisely her view from there that empowers her song, a “song of liberation—personal and social, moral and economic... praising God's actions on behalf of all marginal and exploited people,” in the words of scholar Jane Shaberg.

Its why these stories of Mary are such “dangerous memories” according to theologian Elizabeth Johnson in her fabulous book *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary and the Communion of Saints*. Dangerous to the ways of power and privilege, to white supremacy and all of its ugly manifestations: misogyny, racism, heterosexism and all other systems that prevent human flourishing. Dangerous too, to the “gospel of prosperity and glory” that dominates and deforms so much of “American Christianity” today. Mary's song, prelude to the whole gospel of Jesus, has nothing to do with individual salvation or anyone's zip code in eternity—it is all about God's liberating presence and healing power right here and right now, especially with all those who suffer.

Is it any wonder that the church, steeped in its own particular forms of patriarchy and power, has been trying to shush her up for the last 2000 years—along with every other powerful female figure in scripture and in history. Even our well-meaning cycle of lectionary readings – first devised in the 1960s to encourage preaching on a broader range of scripture passages, betrays a clear, if unintentional bias. This particular dangerous memory of Mary shows up only a couple of times in the three year rotation of readings, and then only in pieces, so that much of the entire story's deeper meaning gets lost. Most other Mary stories are excluded, as are most women leaders in the gospels, as are nearly all of the many powerful female figures from the Hebrew Scriptures: Miriam, sister of Moses; Deborah, Israel's *greatest* judge; Huldah the prophet; the two crafty midwives at the center of the Exodus story; the liberator Judith; and the great queen Esther to name just a few.

Is there, do you suppose, any relationship between this systematic silencing of female voices in our own sacred stories, and the ongoing scandal of gender discrimination still so pervasive in church and society. Many denominations, citing scripture, still prohibit women clergy. The PCUSA overcame that one, thankfully, some 60 years ago. Today, according to a recent study, women make up a majority of our seminary graduates, and only about third of our pastors. The pay gap between men and women in our church is even larger than the national average, and about 80 percent of our female ministers say that they have experienced some form of discrimination, harassment or prejudice in the church. A friend of mine tells the story about her interview for a clergy position in a Presbyterian church, that ended when one of the search committee members declared: I like my nurses to be girls and my pastors to be men. It also ended her career in the ministry. The situation with race in our churches is even worse, and I hope that we will make space for a deeper examination of these issues as we continue exploring “Becoming the Beloved Community” in the months ahead.

We ignore the voices of the marginalized at our own peril. If we do not listen, and honor, the stories of women and people of color, of gay, differently abled, and economically challenged human beings, we simply cannot understand the world,

ourselves, **or** the fullness of our faith. As black theologian James Cone points out, the gospel of Jesus—the good news-- was written by and for oppressed people; privilege blinds, distorts and deforms.

I wonder what might happen if we actually gave this powerful prophet, Mary—and others like her--room to speak, and space to grow in our moral and religious imaginations. What if we invited Mary, our sister—not Queen, not Christmas pageant prop, but companion -- back into our community of hope?

We could start with the *whole* dangerous memory--which begins, as told by Luke, back with Mary's baffling encounter with God's messenger, in the so-called annunciation scene, where this poor, young, brown woman, at the absolute back of room—is invited to birth a whole new creation. And she responds—*she responds!* Yes! baffled and joyful, hers is a resounding yes to “solidarity with the project of the reign of God” as Johnson puts it. Her active and courageous consent is the opposite of tradition's humble submission. Its also a subtle reminder that a healthy connection with the Holy is not about things making sense, or knowing all the answers, or even feeling particularly safe or comforted, it is rather about deep trust in the power of Love, very often in spite of all the evidence. It is an invitation planted in every human heart.

Mary's yes leads next to a dangerous wilderness journey, as she hurries out alone, to seek the company of another Spirit filled woman, her cousin Elizabeth, also powerful and prophetic and pregnant with new life. Two unlikely women join together in a radiant community of hope; through their mutual encouragement they are inspired to carry on with confidence, joy, and compassion, in spite of the darkness around them and the struggles that they must know lie ahead. Two women of Spirit birthing hope. From there, Mary is inspired and empowered to sing her great song of liberation, and it is with that lullaby of resistance in the air that both Jesus and John are born.

Mary invites us to sing with her, to travel with her on a perilous and joy filled adventure, to renew and deepen our own trust in Love and to find new life in our own communities of hope. In joining together, we are so much better equipped to resist darkness and oppression with confidence and compassion. We don't get to know how it all turns out, and if we take the dangerous memory of Mary seriously we will understand that not knowing is its own blessing—her journey takes her right to the foot of the cross after all. What we do get to know is this: God is good, God is present, and God is acting especially where there is suffering; anxiously waiting to give birth to whole new possibilities for healing and wholeness, in and through every willing heart, in and through you today. All it takes is yes. And may this be so.

What is Privilege? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hD5f8GuNuGQ>