
Good Better News
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
December 20, 2020
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 1:26-35, 46-55

“My soul doth magnify the lord”. What wonderful words that we just read from Luke. The words are well known to many of us. The words come to us in Advent just as surely as Advent comes at all. The words are words of hope. The words are words of faith.

These well-known and well-loved words are sometimes called “the Song of Mary”. They are also called the “Magnificat” because in the Latin wording of the text, the first word is “magnificat” - meaning “magnify”. The fact that the text is named at all tells us that these words have been part of church life and church liturgy for a long time.

But - at the same time - this focus on Mary is not quite so simple. In Protestant tradition, Mary is not given much space in our minds and our hearts. Of course, Mary is a dominant character in Christmas Pageants. But I was raised to believe that thinking of Mary as someone really special was a job that we left to the Catholic Church. Mary was a part of our pageants, but she was not a part of Protestant theology. In fact, I remember growing up being suspicious of Catholics mainly because of their reverence for Mary. And even today, Catholics are still accused of worshipping Mary. Which is an incorrect and misleading interpretation of Catholic theology and liturgy.

For Protestants, Mary has often been seen as simply a vessel. A container. A container that carried something important - Jesus. But Protestants consistently emphasized that Jesus was the important part - not the container itself. On the one hand, I understand that position. Clearly, Jesus is important to us. On the other hand - many of us are parents, and we know the many ways that we contribute to the lives of our own children. A mother is not just a vessel. Parents contribute far beyond providing food and shelter to a child. If we limit our understanding of Mary to simply “a vessel”, then perhaps we miss deeper possibilities.

In any case, the lectionary gives us two readings about Mary this week, so it’s a

good chance to reflect on what Mary means to us - and on what Mary might mean to us.

In our first reading, Mary was approached by the angel Gabriel who told her some news. But let's be honest - the news was not only a surprise to Mary, it was probably not even possible that she understood the news. She certainly could not have understood the implications of the news. Gabriel did not give Mary an advance copy of the New Testament after all. Even in the text it says that Mary "was much perplexed by the angel's words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."

Mary pondered. Well of course. How could she not ponder news that was so radical, so unexpected, so hard to understand, so hard to believe. You may recall that Mary ponders at other times too - she ponders after the shepherds visit and make their own statements about Jesus. Understandably, Mary had a lot to ponder.

In our second reading, however, Mary does not ponder. 10 verses after she "was perplexed by the angel's words" she sings a song that is complex and deeply theological. She sings a song of clarity, of certainly. A song of being at peace with what was happening to her.

When we read these stories together as we just did I feel like someone flipped over too many pages at once. There must be a piece missing. A part in the story where Mary spent time reflecting on the news and reacting to it. But instead, an angel comes to Mary with news that the spirit will put a seed inside her and she will give birth to the son of God and she basically says, "... and?". In the story, she takes it all in stride.

And what are we to do with this image that we have of this perfect Mary. The one who understood the incomprehensible. The one who could be calm in the face of total chaos and uncertainty. The one who in a time of deep stress wrote the Magnificat. Instead of reaching for a bottle of Prozac like you and I probably would have done.

I'm sorry to tell you this - but I cannot relate to that Mary. In fact for many of us, that image of a "perfect" Mary is a barrier. It's a barrier to getting down to who the real Mary might have been. The angel came to Mary and took away her innocence. Then the church came to Mary, and wrote her story in a way that denies Mary her basic humanity, her frailties, her insecurities, her fears. Instead of being given a story about a scared unmarried teenager dealing with pregnancy - someone we might actually relate to - we

have been given a story of the perfect Mary who understood everything and felt truly blessed to be chosen by God for a particular task. I feel like the real, human Mary is in the story, but that she has been buried in it somewhere just beyond our sight.

But of course we can choose how to read this story. We can choose to read the story in a way that honours and remembers that Mary was young. That Mary was afraid. That Mary was uncertain about her own future as well as the future of her unborn child. That Mary was perplexed by her own situation. That Mary needed time to reflect and to ponder. A Mary that was not perfect. A Mary that did not need to be perfect.

If we read the story of Mary in that way, then we just might have to accept the fact that we can relate to Mary ourselves. We know what it is like to feel fear. We know what it is like to face an uncertain future. We know what it's like to be on a path that our friends and family do not accept. We know what it is like to feel fear for our children. We know what it is like to be perplexed, to feel the need to get away and reflect on things.

In fact, if we read the story that way, we might relate to it a little too well. We might even end up asking ourselves if we are open to hearing messages from God ourselves. We might even end up asking ourselves how best we should invite God into our lives, and let God open our lives to new directions.

But we usually want to resist that. We don't want to imagine that we have the capacity to do amazing things. We'd rather believe that those actions come to particular, special, people - the Mary's of the world. We'd rather put her on a pedestal as final proof that - of course - we cannot do God's work ourselves. It's so much easier to simply imagine that we have nothing to offer. We are small. We are poor. We are powerless. Surely we are not expected to begin new things. Surely we are not expected to bring the Kingdom of God to earth here. Surely, not us!

The Australian comedy team the "Axis of Awesome" have a song about that. Well, it's not about Mary, it's about Jesus. But it speaks to our desire to believe that we are too powerless to contribute to God's kingdom, and that we are justified when we do nothing at all. It's a song that responds to the whole "What would Jesus do" movement. I won't sing it, but some of the words are, "You can't do what Jesus can do. there are 3 of him and their's only one of you. He had 12 disciples, and no one follows you. So next time

you're in trouble, thinking "what would Jesus do". Try not to forget he's a million trillion billion times better than you." Now that's a de-motivational speech.

I feel we are touched by this here too. Here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church we might feel that we don't have what it takes to reach out to our own community. Certainly, we cannot reach out in the ways we have in the past. COVID has taken away the opportunities we used to explore for outreach to our community. Our outreach was based on being present for our community mainly by opening our doors to the community. And that is one thing that COVID has taken away - for now at least. We are starting to imagine new outreach activities now. But those discussions are always from the place of ... we can't do this or we can't do that. That's our reality now.

And for me personally, now that we've been together for 10 months, by now I expected to have a vibrant ministry at both the Lynden Park Mall and the Library. But that just can't happen - yet. Terry and others made up that wonderful video based on the song "Can't Touch That". But since March we've been singing the song, "Can't Do That".

This year in particular we have felt powerless in new ways. "Try not to forget Jesus is a million trillion billion times better than you". Sigh.

But 2021 will be different. We may still act from a position of some weakness, but we will act. And if we read the gospels again - we can remind ourselves that the ministry that Jesus had was also a ministry of weakness. Personal ministry, reaching out to others in our own community is empowered by weakness and vulnerability anyway! If we want to connect with the vulnerable in our own community we can do that best when we acknowledge our own vulnerability first. Our feelings of weakness are a gift.

The good news of Advent is that Jesus came. But the even better news of Advent is that Jesus came as a helpless baby, not as a rich powerful waring king. The even better news of Advent is that Jesus came to an unwed mother, not to the matriarch of the village or the matriarch of the synagogue. The good news of Advent is that God is with us. But the even better news of Advent is that Jesus came in a time of poverty, not a time of wealth. The even better news of Advent is that Jesus came to a land of impoverishment, not to a land of indulgence.

If the story of Jesus's birth happened today, I have no trouble imagining Jesus being born right in downtown Brantford, perhaps being born in the Brantford manger scene located in one of the parks that our homeless community share. Where else would we expect to find Jesus?

The good news of Advent is that God is with us. But the even better news of Advent is that we engage in the story as we accept our own weakness and vulnerability.

Or perhaps even more miraculously - Jesus can be born right here - in your heart - in my heart - in the heart of this community right here.

God is with us - Emmanuel! That's Advent. There really is nothing more to say. All that is left is for us to live it. We are already who we need to be. We are already where we need to be. We just need to understand that Advent is actually a verb.

Amen.