
Advent #4: All generations will call me ... vulnerable
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

based on Luke 1:39-56

Today, I want to talk about Mary. You know, the mother of Jesus? Yes, I realize that this is a radical topic, especially in the United Church of Canada. Because in the United Church of Canada we have often given Mary very little space in our worship or in our hearts. Historically - this was tied to a deep distrust of Roman Catholics. And that was largely because of very inaccurate views that we held on how Roman Catholics thought of Mary. And so we have often given Mary very little space, other than having her stuffed into a manger in a Christmas pageant. Often without a speaking role. Often being told to look demure and keep quiet. We have even minimized talking about Mary. But this is Advent. And Advent is all about change.

I'm sure that some of you struggle to believe what I just said about our view of Roman Catholics. We are open-minded people, right? Sure. But historically we are not very far removed from animosity with Roman Catholics. Here is one story I can share. When I was in seminary, they often gave us old books and asked us to read them, or specific parts of them. This was one way for us to not completely be out of touch with our past. And our present. Some of the books we were asked to return. And some of the books we were free to keep. And some of them I burned because the garbage can was too good for them.

One book we had to read was from 1954. It was called "What's the difference?". I'm pretty sure it was this one.

[image: what's the difference book]

But it was definitely called "What's the difference?" and it was allegedly about the differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics.

The title of the book suggests a rational, thought-provoking consideration of how Protestants and Roman Catholics beliefs differ. I also imagined that the book would include a discussion of how amazingly similar we are too. I imagined that the book would

help bridge the historic rift between Roman Catholics and Protestants.

But this was 1954. And history rarely disappoints. In spite of the hopeful title suggesting an expansive view of theology and in invitation into broadening our own faith by learning from each other, the contents of the book projected a completely different tone. Page after page was filled with inaccurate straw-man understandings of Catholicism. “What’s the difference?” Was actually code for “Why Protestants are right!” The book should properly have been titled “Why Catholics are wrong!” That was 1954.

Of course, the professors at seminary were not idiots. They wanted us to react to the book. They made us read that material for at least 2 reasons:

1. When we returned the books during class, students were invited to share their observations. I believe I was the most loquacious student that day. I myself have attended numerous spiritual retreats at Catholic retreat centres. Marjorie and I participated in a “Engaged Encounter” retreat at a Catholic retreat centre as part of our preparation for marriage. I had a Catholic girlfriend at one time. Anyway, after the students had calmed down a bit (which took awhile) the professor said that we had all likely skipped over the one page that explained the whole book. The prologue of the book - which I had certainly not bothered to read - listed the editorial board that had produced the book. They were all Protestant! That was a warning to how we read our own history.
2. The second warning was even more pointed. We - hopeful ministerial types that we were - we told that after we get into a pulpit, some of our flock will actually agree with the sentiments of the book. And I have found that to be true in every single congregation I’ve been in ministry with. Yes, including this one.

But this is Advent. And Advent is all about change.

[image: Mary jedi]

And let’s be honest. The Church has given us a fairly unrealistic image of Mary to begin with. Just go online for images of Mary and you’ll see what I mean.

In the biblical version - as you know I’m sure, Mary is 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.”

[image: Mary quiet]

In our reading from Luke today, however, Mary does not ponder. 10 verses after Mary “was perplexed by the angel’s words” Mary 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 consider these stories together I feel like someone flipped over too many pages at once. There must be a piece missing. A part of the story where Mary spent time reflecting on the news and reacting to it. Perhaps a period of incredulity. 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?”. She takes it all in stride.

[image: Mary demure]

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 intense stress wrote the magnificat instead of reaching for a bottle of Prozac like you and I would have done.

[image: Mary silent]

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 was. 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 bizarre assignment. I feel like the real, human Mary is in the story, but she has been buried in it somewhere beyond our sight.

[image: verna’s video]

Which is why I really appreciate the video that Verna, Gail, and I made that offers a more human image of Mary. Verna wrote the script. She “read between the lines” of the nativity story and injected some real emotion into Mary. Because in the biblical version, we just do not see the highs and lows that Mary - the actual Mary - must have experienced.

[go down to the creche]

Which reminds me. I invited all of you to consider if any characters are missing from our nativity scene. Did anyone here bring a character to add to our scene?

This nativity scene will be here until Jan 8 - epiphany Sunday. So you have a few more weeks to consider who you think needs to be added to the scene.

The Mary that the church gave us is perfect. But that Mary was clearly written by men. I have a question for everyone here who has actually given birth. What is one emotion that you experienced after giving birth that is completely absent from the biblical nativity story? Here’s a video that helps give us one version of that Mary:

[VIDEO]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gZBcQ4oMvw>

[image: Mary statue]

I do not believe in the perfect Mary. But I do believe in the Mary who was an unmarried, pregnant, 13 or 14 year old girl. I believe in the Mary who was afraid and confused. I believe in the Mary who did not really know that everything would be alright in the end. I believe in the Mary who just like us lives with both hopes and fears, strengths and frailties, faith and reality. I believe in the Mary who just like us did not have to be perfect in order to be a blessing to others.

[image: vulnerability ahead]

Mary did not have to be perfect. But she did have to make space to be vulnerable. She had to be vulnerable enough to work with reality as it unfolded. To be open to miracle, wonder, and ultimately, to good news.

Imagine Mary not accepting that reality. Imagine Mary saying to God, “I don’t want to give birth now, I’m too young”. Imagine Mary telling God she wanted to wait until she got married. Imagine Mary saying, “I wanted a girl!”. Mary was open to

however God showed up. Mary had to be vulnerable in order to feel blessed.

And perhaps that is how we can relate to Mary ourselves. In Luke this morning Mary said, “all generations will call me blessed, for the mighty one has done great things for me”¹. But as I said in Snippets, surely most of us can also say “the might one has done great things for me”. Can’t we? Do we not also feel loved by God? Do we not feel blessed ourselves?

If we do not, perhaps it is because we are not open to however God shows up. Here. Today. If we are not willing to be vulnerable, it is not likely that we will see God in our midst because we will be looking for something too specific. We have to be open to possibility. We have to be open to experience. We have to be vulnerable. If you don’t believe me, try giving birth in a barn and see how that feels.

In my mind, Mary should have said, “all generations will call me vulnerable, and because I made myself vulnerable, I was able to embrace God in my midst.” We can do that too. Christmas Day is still 1 week away. Have you been finding God in your midst yet? I certainly hope so. But if not, perhaps considering opening yourself to being more vulnerable this week. Put away expectations from your past and open yourself to God wherever and whenever God shows up.

Today - as it was 2000 years ago - God does not show up in the ways that we expect. But God still shows up. Thanks be to God.
Open yourselves to the divine in your midst.

Amen.

¹ Luke 1:48b-49a.