

## Mary: Bearer of the Light

Preachers face a difficult task in preaching weekly. The longer we are ordained, the more challenging it can feel to reach out and make what we read in scripture connect to what we see and live in the world. Christmas and Easter are particularly challenging because we feel an increase in pressure to make the message one that is both fresh and traditional. To celebrate a liturgy that is both; comforting and challenging.

Those of you who know me, know that I don't preach in a sweet, delicate way. There is nothing sweet or delicate about me. When I preach I challenge and I rant, I cry and I celebrate. And you, lucky ones who are here in person and online get to come with me...should you choose to do so. Tonight's sermon is not a gentle story, told as a Christmas card image comes to life, with the undertones of a beautiful Christmas hymn to accentuate the message of peace, light and joy.

Nope. Not tonight. Tonight's message is focussing on the delivery of messages – from angels to the mother of Jesus herself. Get comfortable.

When we tell the story of the birth of Jesus, we usually focus on Luke's gospel as it paints a beautiful picture for us. The Lukan community writes of angels quite often and in those days angels were taken quite seriously. They were not the cherubic naked babies with tiny gossamer wings we see in animated holiday specials. Quite the opposite.

Angels in those days were the messengers of God and the chief messenger was Gabriel. He visited Elizabeth and Zechariah to tell them of their incredible news. And that incredible news was named John.

Gabriel visited Mary and told her she was going to have a miracle baby. She was chosen as God's light bearer. Mary, a thirteen year old girl, who is engaged, yet not married, is going to give birth to the saviour of the world. For years I scoffed at the idea that Mary burst into song after her cousin Elizabeth recognises that Mary is pregnant.

It did not seem a "natural" thing to do. Full disclosure: I have been known at various times in my life, such as a Tuesday while cooking dinner, to burst into song. Fair is fair. My songs are not original songs, they are show tunes, musicals, songs from drag queens, a movie soundtrack or a Canadian artist.

Not Mary's song. Her magnificat was an original song. I'll come back to this in a moment.

Mary went to be with her cousin Elizabeth, who was approaching the time of isolation as she prepared for the birth of her first child, John. Elizabeth had a child in her womb that would be the messenger for the child in Mary's womb. Both ladies would have known the sacred story from Malachi, in which the prophet said, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." (Malachi 3.1, NRSV)

For centuries, Mary has been depicted in iconography and other artistic formats as meek, her eyes cast downward. She is often robed in sarum blue, and may appear with a crown and/or a halo, and/or the sacred heart beating outside her chest. I find these images distressing and unapproachable. In the past few years, I have, to my absolute joy, seen images of Mary with a glowing belly, rather than a halo. Hands cradling the bump which is glowing with ethereal light. She is often wearing blue, perhaps white as well. She is looking down at the growing belly with a sense of wonder, joy and awe.

We often forget that Mary was a regular Palestinian teenager when she was chosen to be the Theotokos, the bearer of light. Whom we know as Jesus the Christ.

The season of advent is a season of preparation, a season of anticipation and for anyone who has prepared for the birth of a baby or the birth of a grandbaby, these are exciting and somewhat terrifying times. Will the room be ready? What colour should it be painted? Do we want to know the gender? Will the baby be healthy? Will we know what to do? How will we know it's time? SO many questions...

Mary does not get enough attention during Advent. We tend to focus more on John, which is great, but really, in my humble opinion, Mary should get AT LEAST as much air time as John.

And that is why she gets the first mention tonight. Because, without Mary, there is no Emmanuel. Without the light-bearer, there is no light.

Gabriel appears to Mary to tell her she will give birth to a miraculous baby. She is also told that her elder cousin Elizabeth is in her seventh month and Mary makes haste and visits her cousin. There are some wonderful artist renderings of Mary and Elizabeth, hands on one another's belly's, heads thrown back in laughter and pure, unadulterated joy. Corby Eisbacher's original watercolour "Jump for Joy" is a beautiful example of this.

These images speak to me in their humanity of Mary. As with many parents, once childbirth has taken place, they can lose their identity in their own right, and become "Someone's Parent". In some cases Mary is relegated to a footnote in the history of Jesus. This is not right, especially considering how counter-cultural she was in her own right; in her own day.

The Magnificat is referred to as the oldest Advent hymn. What tune Mary uses is unknown and there are believed to be dozens of settings. Even Johan Sebastien Bach wrote two settings! The tune is not important though, the words are what are truly remarkable.

Let me set the stage – Mary has hastened to visit her cousin Elizabeth as she prepares to give birth. Elizabeth's baby, John, hears Mary's voice, in utero and leaps for joy. Disconcerting at best, terrifying at worst.

Then we read:

"And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'  
(Luke 1.40-45, NRSV)

Mary has been visited by an angel and has kept this information to herself, which is absolutely understandable. Yet after her cousin recognises just who she is and just what she is about to do, Mary responds with what Heidi Newmark, American theologian, Lutheran Minister and Keynote Speaker from our Clergy Conference this year, referred to as a "battle cry".

The world is about to get turned on its head, everything that had been previously known is going to flip itself around. Listen to this –

And Mary said,  
'My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.' (Luke 1.46-55, NRSV)

Society at that time was all about leadership by fear – Rome.  
The wealthy were a higher class of citizen than the poor – sound familiar?  
Mary refers to herself as God's "servant" and she is prepared to be God's handmaiden or whatever analogy you choose to use.

She is not afraid of being a servant of God.  
She is not afraid of being a young Mum.  
She is not afraid to take on the establishment.

God is doing a new thing – and Mary is the one who will make it a reality. God needs someone to announce that a new thing is happening, when the time is right.

We, as 21st century followers of Jesus know this to be his cousin John. God needs someone to bring that light that can not be extinguished to the world. God will not create this blessed being from earth as God did with the first earthling, Adam. Rather, God will create this new being from human flesh.

Flesh taken from a young woman who is prepared to stand the establishment on its end. She proclaims that God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, has filled up the meek and lowly with good things and sent the powerful away empty-handed. Certainly not what was expected in those days and certainly not what is expected these days.

Days of ridiculous food prices.

Days of increasing homelessness in unexpected areas.

Homelessness and housing insecurity has always been with us, and now we are seeing it everywhere. In our small valley it is estimated that there are anywhere from 15 to 20 people homeless or living in untenable living situations.

With these bitterly cold temperatures, how will they survive?

Who's job is it to take care of them?

Where will they stay?

What can we do?

We need a Marian uprising! To shake the complacent from their cocoons.

To urge the NIMBY's (not in my backyard) into action. We need community to do what community does best, and that is to care for one another.

That call to action from Mary is one we need all heed.

And yet tonight is about change, grief, death and new life.

Change from how things were done a year ago, three years ago, ten years ago  
Grief from the knowledge that what has been will never be again.

Death of many who have died in the past three years, including David Barrett,  
Jack Buchanan, Irene Endicott and my Mam.

New life in the partnership of two  
Worshiping with so much in common, yet  
different enough to make things interesting.

Daring to dream - as we have done before - that things can be made new  
again, deep in the knowledge and trust that, as followers of Jesus, we believe  
fervently in resurrection.

And so, my sisters and brothers.

And so, our family and friends.

And so, our neighbours and newcomers, welcome!

We look forward to seeing you again, if not in person, then online.

We have work to do, as God's hands and feet in the world.

We need to take a page from Mary's book and challenge those forces which  
create injustice and inequality.

The world that God foresaw, that Mary made possible and that Jesus worked  
towards, was a world in which every human being was treated with the  
utmost decency and dignity. Where every voice was heard. Where every  
heart would celebrate the unadulterated no-strings-attached love of God.

We're not there – yet – yet I am hopeful that together we can make that world  
a reality. A world where everyone is equal. Where resources of plenty are  
shared and distributed with joy making enough for all, rather than too much in  
one area and not enough in another. Am I naive? Absolutely.

And I am also crazy enough to change myself and my own corner of creation  
and begin a chain reaction that will change the world.

One heart, mind, body and soul at a time.

Someone asked me what I wanted for Christmas this year. I struggled to  
answer them because there isn't a single "thing" that I want for Christmas.

What I want is a kinder world. A gentler place where Mary's battle cry is heard today, 2,000 years later, and loved into reality.

A place where the world learns to share instead of hoard.

A place where decision makers consider the people ahead of the policy.

A place where justice is a reality for all - regardless of race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, economic reality, or of personal identity.

A place of kindness.

Of respect.

Of hope, peace, love and joy.

A place where war ends, and the world knows only love.

A place where children learn to love instead of to fear.

And a place where all come to know and have deep, meaningful relationships with the divine, in whatever way that divinity is manifested.

Remembering the night that love came down to earth as Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-and-among-us by his mother Mary; theotokos, God-bearer, bringer of the light. She, who has been remembered for generations and referred to as blessed. She who birthed the One who would be known as the light which cannot be extinguished.

We owe a great deal to Mary. And so on behalf of a grateful world, I say to you Mary, Thank You. Thank You for saying Yes. Thank You for teaching your Son to also say Yes. Thank You.

Amen.

The Reverend Canon Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent  
Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry  
Christ Church Anglican & Fernie Knox United Church  
Regional Dean of the East Kootenay Region  
Christmas Eve 2022  
Luke 2.1-20