

Waiting...for Love

We're finally here! After three weeks of Gospels about John, it's FINALLY Mary's turn!

But before we dive in too deeply, there's an error in the text. A translation error. In the original Hebrew, Mary is described as בתולה (almah) which means 'young woman'. The word for 'virgin' is אישה צעירה (bethulah) and does not appear in the Hebrew scriptures. Now, regardless of whether you believe Mary was a virgin or a young woman, something remarkable did, in fact, happen.

Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel. He told her 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you. 'But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.'" (Matthew 1.28-30, NRSV) She is described as perplexed. Perplexed?

It is believed that Mary was about 13 years old when she birthed Jesus. Do you know any teenage girls? Would any of them simply accept that an angel visited them; that they were told they would give birth to a holy child; and yet remain chaste? And their reaction would be perplexed? I can think of other words to describe that...perplexed is not one of them.

Many years ago I was hosting the Youth Group at the Church where I was ministering. There were four teenage girls and two teenage boys. We had a Taize style worship in the sanctuary, seated on the floor in front of the altar (I was much more nimble 13 years ago) and I read the story of the Annunciation, the gospel we heard read today. I asked each of the youth what they would say, if they were Mary. One of the boys started laughing. The four girls agreed that they would argue with the angel. The other boy said, very simply, "I would do it". I asked why. His reply was beautiful. He said "Because God told me, through the angel. If God asks, then you do it."

Interestingly, Mary is mentioned more often in the Quran than she is in the Bible. She has an entire "Sura" or Chapter devoted to her. Her encounter with Gabriel is similar, although she does put up more of a fuss. In fact, when he gives birth she is entirely alone. Joseph does not receive any mention as the husband of Mary, in the Quran. When Mary gives birth she is alone and in pain, and is told by Allah to reach out to the palm tree and it will shake down dates to relieve her pain. No stable. No donkey. No census. No Joseph.

Many Followers of Jesus people see Mary as an important figure, as she is the Mother of Jesus. She's the brave, yet silent, stoic woman, who stands at the foot of the cross as her son is crucified and murdered. All of his friends have scattered in fear, yet she remains, grieving. Silent.

Now, the Mary of today's reading is young. She is written, in this section, as one who is obedient. She says to the angel 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' (Luke 1.38) In other words "Let's do this".

For many followers of Jesus, that is about all we hear of Mary until she gives birth to a perfect baby boy who does not cry, then we don't hear much from her. She is relegated to the sidelines, because her work is considered finished.

However, if you read the next section of the Gospel, where she goes to visit Elizabeth, something absolutely remarkable happens. Mary goes to see her cousin who is much older and is pregnant...with John. Everybody still with me? Excellent. John, in utero, hears Mary's voice and leaps for joy. Yikes. Poor Elizabeth. Elizabeth recognizes that Mary is pregnant, but Mary is very newly pregnant and not yet "showing". Yet Elizabeth knows and names it as such. What Mary does next is absolutely revolutionary. She bursts into song! Well, not literally...at least, not at that moment.

Luke 1. Verses 46-55 is known as Mary's Song of Praise or Magnificat. It has been put to music since the 4th Century. Here is the Magnificat:

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)

Pretty nice words, but revolutionary? Well, yes. Check this out.

"He has **scattered the proud** in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has **brought down the powerful** from the thrones

He has **lifted up the lowly**

He has **filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.**"

In other words, Mary is foretelling what Jesus will be made manifest through God. The powerful will be taken down a peg or two. The poor will receive their justice. The hungry will be fed and the pretentious will be sent away empty-handed. Take THAT, establishment.

Remember these words. **Mary is a revolutionary.** She has not only agreed to be the vessel in which the Christ Child is born, she is going to prepare him to live a radical life filled, not with power, **but with love**. He will not be taught to follow the establishment; rather, he will be taught to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and advocate for the voiceless. And who teaches him these things? HIS MOM!

Now that's love. Regardless of whether you believe Mary was a young woman or a virgin doesn't really matter in this context. What we do know, is that Mary was not some

naive, passive little girl. She was a revolutionary who realised she had a powerful responsibility and an incredible opportunity. Mary was CHOSEN by GOD to be the Light-Bearer. The one who would bear the manifestation of God in LIFE! Mary's favour with God did not end when her son was born; really, it had only begun. Mary along with Joseph, taught Jesus about the Hebrew scriptures.

Both Jesus and John come from powerful women. Elizabeth receives a miracle in conceiving and giving birth in what is referred to as "old age"...rude. She is told through her husband Zechariah, what the angel Gabriel told him; that she will have a son, whose name will be John. Her son will be the one to announce the coming of the Messiah. According to custom, the Messiah would be announced prior to his arrival. He would not introduce himself. Thus, John was born with a mission already waiting for him.

Mary was told by directly by the angel Gabriel, that she would conceive and bear a son who would be Emmanuel or God-With-Us. "Emmanuel" or "The Christ" or "Anointed One" or "Messiah" were all titles. The baby born, would be called Yeshua or Joshua, yet would come to be known as Jesus (the Greek translation of Yeshua). His name, growing up, would have been Yeshua ben Yoseph or Joshua, Son of Joseph.

Was Mary told that her baby boy would one day be crucified? That he would be murdered by the establishment she had taught him to push back against? Regardless of whether she knew directly or not, she taught him to speak up. She taught him to speak out. And in the end, the establishment killed his earthly body. But they did not kill her boy. That boy's legacy is one of love.

Love in the face of prejudice.

"Could anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1.46)

Love in the face of injustice.

"Nicodemus could only come by cover of night" (John 3.2)

Love in the face of his own racism.

"Even the dogs eat the crumbs from under the table" (Mark 7.28)

Love in the face of his execution.

"Forgive them, for they do not know not what they are doing." (Luke 23.34)

Even today, there are many radical ways in which we show love.

By listening to the medical professionals, washing our hands, wearing masks, staying home, not traveling; even though these things can be tremendous hardships.

By listening fully, not with the intention of formulating an answer, but listening fully, with the intention of learning.

By holding space for someone who is hurting. Not trying to fill the silence, but squirming in the discomfort, because words cannot fill the pain-filled void.

By preaching at your Beloved's funeral, even though your own heart is breaking, because a promise made is a promise kept.

By requesting your husband's funeral be on your wedding anniversary, as that is the most significant date of your life together.

All these, and many more, are the radical ways in which we show and share love with one another.

Your dad, as you are departing, saying "Do you have enough gas" and "Call your Mum when you get home". That is how he shows love.

Your Auntie, pressing a \$20 bill in your hand, and sending you with a bag of groceries as you leave her, because she knows you are a starving student and won't ask for help. That is how she shows love.

Your friend, staying with you all night on the phone, because they are worried about your mental health and don't want you to be alone. That is how they show love.

These continue to be difficult times in which to live. Most, if not all of us, have had to adjust our "usual" Christmas plans. Some of us are finding new ways to savour the best of the season, often using technology. Love is shown in small and in large ways.

Now, let's remember that the great love we have for each other is minuscule compared to the love God has for us.

The love that God chose Mary to be the light-bearer of the world.

The love that Mary had in accepting that awesome responsibility, with grace and, I dare say, a bit of grit.

The love that Jesus had in choosing to die for us, that we may know eternal life.

The love with which the Spirit holds us in our discomfort, frustration and exhaustion, when life feels like too much, while we are waiting on The Christ to return.

It's not long now, until the baby boy is born in less than ideal, yet absolutely perfect conditions, to show us a truly infinite love.

Thanks be to God! O Come, O Come Emmanuel...

Advent IV – 20 December 2020
Luke 1.26-38

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