

St. Mary the Virgin

“He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made....”

There is a writer from South Georgia named Bailey White who used to appear on National Public Radio. She would quite regularly, with a raspy voice, that made her seem much older than she is, read her short stories after the top news stories had been run. The first one that caught my imagination was one about a man who was shucking oysters and quite unceremoniously cut off by accident the end of a finger that fell into the Croker sack full of iced raw oysters...The guests of the party looked and looked for the finger, but never found it...the old man said for them not to bother that that finger was always getting in the way anyway.....She wrote of moonlit live oaks speaking to her of other worlds...of frogs in the swamp at night donning the voices of her ancestors speaking to her about love and loss and death and hope...but throughout her writing is the recurring figure of the mother...the crafty yet gentle (mostly) and powerful matriarch...she who would order things when things got out of control....y'all know the saying that when “Mama’s not happy nobody’s happy”...the Matriarch who forgives again and again her husband’s bad habits...her children’s falling short...enduring the pangs of childbirth.... the Matriarch who sees the world as it is, and loves it still...for the matriarch is a life bringer...and understands that there is nothing more powerful than being a life bringer.

White’s first book is a collection of her short stories, entitled *Mama Makes up her Mind and other Dangers of Southern Living*, the implication being, that among the dangers of living in the South, Mama making up her mind is chief among them...Indeed there are times in our lives when what is called for is to make up our minds about something....but when Mama makes up her mind then there’s something serious about to happen...things as we know them are about to change.

In our Gospel reading for today we hear the familiar words of what we call in our tradition the Magnificat...Mary’s song of praise and thanksgiving for God showing her God’s favor....she who our translation calls lowly...but the Greek really means “low-life”...a pregnant un-wed teenage girl.... Living in a world that would kill her for who she is...she refers to herself as servant, but the accurate translation is slave girl...she the lowest of the low, enslaved by the bias of her culture...and Mary is told by the angel and by her cousin Elizabeth that she will bear a son who will be called Son of God, a high honorific in Jewish culture, an honorific not unique to Jesus...It is an honor he will share with the judges and prophets and kings come before...Moses, Samuel, David...Elijah... sons of God...the ones chosen to lead and to teach the people of Israel how to live as God lives...But I think mostly Mary is thankful that her life has been spared and that her life is one that is blessed...that her life is one that has dignity...she sees, in short, her salvation...a low-life raised up to dignity...good news to the low-life of our world...the low-life, those through whom God enters our world, quite the cosmic paradox....and that is something worth singing about....indeed scholars consider this a song...In the Koine Greek text it has rhythm and meter...and was probably sung during Eucharistic feasts in the early church....but this song is much more than a song of praise....in the course of these few verses the song of praise takes on prophetic dimensions and becomes a song of protest...a song sung by prophets come before...like Miriam with her tambourine singing

of Israel's unlikely escape from slavery in Egypt...like Hanna singing of a bright future for Israel, a change in the way of things, at the birth of Samuel...like Deborah ...like Judith singing of God's mercy and steadfastness, and the making right of things...Mary now the prophet reminding God of God's promises of mercy and protection and sustenance...calling down upon the heads of corrupt power and arrogance and greed God's promise of justice...reminding God that God must do what God has always done...She is calling God to account...Mama has made up her mind...and that's serious business...dangerous business...and things are going to be made right...things are going to change.

There, of course, is no way to avoid the political and socio-economic edge to this the only monologue by a woman in the New Testament...Mary here is proclaiming hope to the disenfranchised of our world...and blaming the pitiless status quo of patriarchy for it...top down power, that dis-empowers women, the widow and orphan, children, the immigrant, the stranger, the other...power that lords over the powerless... She reminds God that this isn't the way it is to be, this profound disparity, this world in systemic poverty...She reminds God in song...song, a product of the imagination that I suspect more likely gets God's attention than mere words spoken... She reminds God that if this good favor is for me...then surely it must be for everybody...dignity and blessing for everybody...remember?

In the turbulent 1960's in Central America, in Guatemala and Honduras, the Magnificat was banned from being recited in Churches. When Caesar Chaves led the migrant workers of California and the southwestern United States in protest against unjust wages and atrocious working conditions, the banner carried by the workers had the depiction of the Virgin...the Virgin of Guadalupe with the inscription of the Magnificat...a dazzling symbol of the hope that things will be set right...Mama has made up her mind.

We are hearing the voice in Mary's song of the ancient goddess...the mother God...the sacred Mother...Isis in Egypt...Ashera in Asia Minor...Sophia in Hebrew scripture...the figure of God's wisdom...God's feminine side, as it were...the aspect of God that demands justice and mercy...that brings new life to the world in artful creativity...In Proverbs...in the Wisdom of Solomon it is she who is called the master builder of Creation, it is she who leads the people Israel out of Egypt...protects them in the desert...Cries out in the market place to wake the people up to the ways of God...She the strong and gently crafty Matriarch who will ultimately have her way...because when Mamma ain't happy.... nobody's happy.

We celebrate the great and sacred mother this day...may her song be heard from generation to generation...and may her song not only be heard but lived...all of us singers, all of us artifice, vessels, all of us mothers of the divine bringing life to our world, creating the world anew in which all are raised up like our sister to dignity...Let us live according to the promises made to Abraham and his descendents for ever...that things are being made right among us, among all people and all nations (whether we like them or not)...that is the promise, pure and simple...that things get made right...And that requires us to make up our minds.