

Sermon Advent 4 Year C, 2024; Gospel Luke 1: 39-55

God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: Help us to see your light. Amen

Listening to God: Mary, Jesus, and Us

I am going to talk about women today. Nothing against the men among us, but I think we should recognize the important and often overlooked role women have played in scripture, and throughout the course of history. Hold that thought. I'll get back to it shortly.

Welcome to this the fourth Sunday of Advent. Our church calendar year begins every year on the first Sunday of Advent, which was three weeks ago on December 1st. You will notice the color blue during the Advent Season, which is the color of hope, confidence, and anticipation, all themes of the Advent season. Four candles on our Advent wreath are now lit, representing hope, peace, joy, and love. We will light the white candle on Christmas Day to celebrate Jesus' birth. The word "advent" is derived from the Latin word *adventus* which means "coming" or "arrival." Our tradition is that Advent is a time for preparation and hopeful waiting for the arrival of the Christ Jesus on Christmas Day.

With the beginning of Advent we began church year C, which uses Luke as its primary text. This gospel was written around 80 CE, about 50 years after Jesus' death, probably by a Gentile man named Luke, perhaps a doctor, who was a companion of Paul who traveled with and supported him. The same author wrote the Acts of the Apostles, sort of a Part 2. Acts is the story of the early church. We've talked before about how each of the four gospels offers a different story with a different focus about the life of Jesus, each with its own unique perspective. Luke is a gospel about peace, nonviolence, and compassion—compassion for the poor, the marginalized, the blind, even the enemy. [Luke contains 18 parables found only in his gospel, some of them the most well known, including the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, and also Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to the two men walking along the road to Emmaus.]

And now back to my focus on women. Luke's Gospel is filled with women, from Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist, to Mary the mother of Jesus, to Jesus' good friends Martha and Mary of Bethany, to the faithful women at the cross and the empty tomb including Mary Magdalene and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. (There are lots of Marys in scripture aren't there?) In all Luke refers to women 45 times in his Gospel. And he continues to emphasize the role of women in the early development of the church in his book Acts, women like Lydia, Phoebe, and Priscilla, and so many others who provide financial and spiritual support for Jesus and for the developing church following his death. It was only later, sadly, that mainstream Christianity would adopt the oppressive rules and attitudes toward women that we have seen throughout history. Luke's genealogy of Jesus traces backwards from Joseph to David all the way to Adam himself, reflecting the all-inclusive appeal Luke is making to both Jews and Gentiles, and that Jesus is the universal Christ. It has only two names in common with the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, but what's even more unusual is that it seems to be Jesus's genealogy traced backwards from his mother's side — not from Joseph. It is the lineage of Mary! Such is the importance Luke places on women in the story of Jesus. The reading in Luke immediately preceding what we read today is about the annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel that she will conceive and bear a son Jesus. The sermon today includes reflection on that prior passage with the Annunciation, on the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, and on Mary's response in her song "The Magnificat." All three of these are unique to Luke's Gospel.

Of all the women Luke mentions it is of course Mary the mother of Jesus that Luke stresses the most. As we reflect upon the Annunciation we have to remember that Mary is a poor unwed teenage woman living on the outskirts, literally and figuratively on the margins, of the empire, in the middle of nowhere. She is of course both fearful and confused upon hearing that she will conceive and give birth to Jesus. In my reading of John Dear's book [The Gospel of Peace](#) ,

I received an insight about Mary that I never noticed before. It is about how she, and implicitly how we, encounter God, how we hear or see or just know—become aware of—God’s presence in the course of our lives, and how we respond to that Presence. Dear’s explanation of Mary’s encounter with the angel Gabriel at the annunciation is that it was through deep listening, what we would now call a contemplative awareness, that she was able to discern God’s voice. The words of the Gospel imply that she had an actual physical visit from the angel, and what we might imagine is an angelic figure with wings floating up to Mary and then speaking to her. But perhaps not. We can read this passage differently. Perhaps something more spiritual and less physical was happening. Perhaps for Mary that was a moment of silence and solitude, and that she just knew that it was God’s Presence she was encountering. She was able to receive and then to respond to and then to act upon that encounter with God. How does she respond? She says “yes”: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” She then hastily sets out to find Elizabeth— at what we call the Visitation—to share the experience. It is during that visit with the much older Elizabeth, soon to become the mother of John the Baptist, that they talk about their experiences with God, reach out to one another in love, and bless one another. It is at the end of the visit that Mary sings her song the Magnificat. Her response to her encounter with God was these words: “He has scattered the proud...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.” It is a wonderfully subversive song, some of the most important prophetic words in scripture, bold and dangerous considering the oppressive Roman Empire ruling over the people, a view of the upside-down world that God is bringing forth, the Kingdom of God that Jesus is sent to usher in.

I have never thought about this encounter of Mary’s listening to God as a reflection on her gift of prayerful listening. Jesus of course knew how to listen to God. As he grew older he often slipped away into the solitude and silence of

nature to be alone with God in prayer. Perhaps he learned about listening to God from his mother Mary. Perhaps by seeing her prayerful awareness, her ability to sit and listen, and her understanding and action of servanthood, he like most children learned from his mother the lesson of this spiritual practice of listening to God. We see him doing just that after his baptism by John in the Jordan River. It is there that he listens to and hears God tell him that he is the beloved Son of God. It is then that he learns his true identity. After his baptism he enters the wilderness where he is tempted to renounce this identity. He does not succumb to the temptation. He does not reject who he truly is. And later, in the Garden of Gethsemane when facing death, he repeats the prayer his mother said over three decades ago, "Let it be done to me according to your will."

Mary's "yes," raises a question for us. Who are we? How do we see ourselves? Are we—can we be—as Mary puts it "a servant" of God? A servant of peace, of love, a "God-bearer" who allows the Christ through us to live and act in the world? And how is it that we actually encounter and see and know God in our lives? How do we like Mary become aware of that Presence? I think it depends on how we envision God. If we think of God as this transcendent being somewhere out there or up there in the sky, separate from us and from the events in our lives, remote and not a part of our experience—the proverbial old man sitting on a throne—then I think we miss the reality of God. God is life itself, love itself, interconnected with all of creation, right here in this moment, around us and within us, the glue that keeps this web of life alive. We are surrounded. I've heard it said that man looking for God is like a fish swimming in the ocean looking for water. The author of Psalm 139 puts it well:

"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the

darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

God’s Presence is inescapable, if we—like Mary—will only listen. God **is** life, everywhere: in the love of your partner; in the imagination that inspires our art, our creativity, our music and our liturgy; in the energy of the people working with our Food Share ministry distributing food to those in need, the hungry; in the compassion and love of our Caring Committee; in the awesome beauty of this church building; in the beauty of creation. What we celebrate this Advent season is the renewal—the refreshing—of our awareness of the divine Presence that is already here, always here. Our tradition is that this celebration culminates on Christmas morning with the birth, once again, of the Christ Jesus. It is our reminder that the Christ is always coming, over and over again. It is our reminder that there is always a light shining in the darkness. Yesterday December 21st was the Winter Solstice, the day with the least sunlight, the darkest day of the year. The light of the sun will shine longer now each day. Look for that light, as we celebrate the incarnation of Christ, Mary’s greatest gift.

Rev. Bob Donnell 12/22/2024