

“Great Things”

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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 Luke 1:46b-55

What do you know about Mary, the mother of Jesus? In the Christmas stories of Matthew and Luke we hear that Mary was engaged to the carpenter Joseph. She was visited by an angel who predicted her pregnancy. She agreed to be part of God’s plan, even though she was still a virgin, or as some translate it, a young, unmarried woman. We also know that after Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph brought him to the Temple and offered a sacrifice of two turtledoves, which showed that they were from a humble or poor background. And we have one story of Mary scolding Jesus as a boy when they lost track of him in Jerusalem, and found him three days later in the Temple.

But apart from these early stories we only see Mary two more times in the gospels. Once when Jesus went home and there was such a big crowd that they couldn’t even eat. And it says that “when his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying (that Jesus had) gone out of his mind.” (Mk 3:20-21). When his mother and brothers came to ask for him, Jesus wouldn’t stop his preaching. Instead he answered, “Who are my mother and my brothers? ... Whoever does the will of God is my brother and mother.” (Mk. 3:31-35).

As far as we know, Mary was not one of Jesus’ followers while he was alive. But we do see her one more time in the gospels, listed with a few other women who looked on from a distance at Jesus’ crucifixion. And it seems she joined the disciples after Jesus’ death because she is mentioned with Jesus’ brothers and all the disciples, gathering for prayer in the beginning of the book of Acts (1:14).

This is all we really know about Mary from the Bible. But people who call Jesus the Son of God, sometimes wonder what his mother must have been like. And so inevitably stories sprang up to expand on what we know from the Bible. There are stories about how Mary was conceived without the stain of original sin. Other stories claim she was dedicated and grew up in the Temple and fed by an angel. There are stories that Mary remained a virgin and was free from sin for her entire life, even though the Bible mentions that Jesus had brothers. And stories also tell how when Mary died, Jesus appeared at her tomb in person with a band of angels who carried her off to heaven.

Some Roman Catholics today still take these stories seriously. But Protestants try to stick to the Bible. We believe Mary was a normal human being. Still, we look up to Mary because God chose her, and because she said “Yes” to God’s grace and plan.

Today Maurice read the song Mary sang, during the time when she was pregnant and went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who blessed her. The song is called “the Magnificat” because it begins with “My soul magnifies the Lord.” My soul tells of God’s greatness. And she said, “My spirit rejoices in God my savior. God has paid attention

and looked with favor on me, his lowly servant. People will call me blessed because of the great things God has done.”

But Mary was not just praising God for her own personal blessing. Mary also saw God blessing the world and bringing down the powers that be. She said, “God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” This song of Mary declares that God is turning everything around, challenging those who rule the earth, and favoring the lowly.

Some people may think of Mary as a heavenly virgin, above the nitty-gritty push and pull of the world. But with the words of this song she sounds more like a revolutionary, who marvels at God undermining the powerful, lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things.

How does God lift up the lowly? Yesterday there was a huge demonstration in Washington D.C. and several smaller ones in New York City and around the nation. I know Molly Callahan was in Washington Square Park as was my husband Tom. They joined tens of thousands of people protesting against a system that seems to favor the proud and powerful and disregard people of low status in our society, especially people of color.

As in any protest, people were carrying signs. A student was carrying a take-off on the anti-terrorism signs. It had a picture of Eric Garner in a choke hold and said, “If you see something, say something. I see racism. I see injustice. I see police brutality. Black lives matter, and I’m saying something.” A friend of ours, a middle-aged white Presbyterian woman, who had never taken part in a demonstration before, carried a home-made sign that said, “Without Justice, None of Us Can Breathe.” And another sign said, “For I, the Lord, love justice,” a quote from the scripture lesson from Isaiah that Jane read today.

The prophet Isaiah wrote that God hates injustice. God hates robbery and wrongdoing. And I might add God hates racism and prejudice. God hates torture and anyone treating another human being as less than human. Isaiah wrote that God had anointed and sent him to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and release to prisoners.

How does one bring good news to people who are oppressed, broken-hearted or imprisoned? Sometimes we may feel helpless to change anything in a world full of injustice and misunderstandings, where a young man can waste away in prison while lawyers and judges stall with no helpful plans, where a person in authority can kill an unarmed man without consequence, where people get away with systematic torture, or where a young man can spray bullets into a classroom of children, and no one is able to change the laws that allow the sale of assault weapons to civilians. In this society, people in power have things their way, and the rich do NOT walk away empty.

But that's how it was in Mary's day as well. The Roman Empire still dominated the people of Israel, and people suffered from abject poverty and hunger. Still, Mary proclaimed God's intention and will for the world, and she chose to align herself with it, and accept her part. That may not seem like a great thing. But God was working through her, to turn the world upside down.

Mary's part was not extraordinary. She was to endure the shame of being pregnant before marriage. And then simply to be a mother, like the rest of us. She rejoiced in her son and worried about him. She probably didn't quite understand what he was doing. But she came when he was in need. She couldn't stop his death, but she was there, present. And when it was over, she joined his disciples to proclaim his resurrection.

God's great things often seem little at the time, but they matter to eternity. We are simply called to do our part, and God does the rest. God calls us to weep with those who weep, to comfort those who mourn, to share God's anger at injustice, and stand with and encourage those who are oppressed. This is what greatness is, not being the biggest, best or strongest, but being where God is present, and willing to take our part. And when God is there, there is resurrection, life and joy.

On this third Sunday of Advent, what can you do to take your part in what God is doing in the world? It may not be anything spectacular. But we are called to bear the good news of God's mercy, justice and love to the world. May we do it with joy and wonder. And know that God is doing great things in, through and around us. In Jesus' name. Amen.