

“A Mother’s Joy or a Prophet’s?” - Sermon by Emily Rose Proctor
3rd Sunday in Advent – Dec. 13, 2015
First Presbyterian Church in Marianna, FL

Luke 1:26-38, 39-56

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.

²⁸And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

³⁴Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

³⁵The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.”

³⁸Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Then the angel departed from her.

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste
to a Judean town in the hill country,

⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting,
the child leaped in her womb.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit

⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry,

“Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

⁴³And why has this happened to me,
that the mother of my Lord comes to me?

⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting,
the child in my womb leaped for joy.

⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment
of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

⁴⁶And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months
and then returned to her home.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

I am so glad that Stanley chose the anthem that he did because it captures perfectly a popular idea we have of Mary—that she is the model of submission. “Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head.” It’s the image of Mary most often depicted in art—her face placid, her hands together in prayer, crossed over her heart or, better yet, holding her child. Here is the icon of our Blessed Virgin, depicted through the centuries by artists and popes alike!

But is this the Mary of the Magnificat? Don’t get me wrong, I’m not trying to say that Mary shouldn’t be celebrated for those famous words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Those are powerful words of consent, especially for those of us who like to be in control, plan ahead, or have things our own way.

But I’d like to propose that Mary is more than simply a willing servant, meek and mild. I’d like to propose that she is also a prophet. Let me explain.

What do we know about prophets in the Bible?

Well, one of the first things we learn is that they can be men or women. The title of prophet is first used to describe Abraham, then Moses’ brother Aaron, and third prophet mentioned in the Bible is Miriam, Moses’ sister, who leads the people in singing and dancing in praise to God—her own Magnificat of sorts (Exodus 15:20). And here, in this first female prophet, we get a taste, not of meek and mild, but of bold and joyous, and maybe even a little disturbing.

You see, Miriam’s song praises God for bringing the parted waters of the Red Sea back together to sweep away the Hebrew people’s Egyptian

pursuers. She is celebrating the defeat of their enemies. It's understandable given that their freedom and their lives were in danger, but nonetheless disturbing if you're one of those that thinks women should keep silent in church or if you're a Christian of the "love your enemies" variety. Miriam is a good reminder that the word prophets bring can sometimes be an unsettling one.

And of course, Mary's name, in Hebrew, is also Miriam. She is named after the first female prophet. Coincidence?

Well, here's another one for you. The second female prophet mentioned in the Bible is Deborah, who was not only a prophet, but a judge who led the Israelites into battle against the Canaanites (Judges 4), when the general whom she asked to lead the charge refused to go without her. Her prediction that because of his cowardice, the Canaanite commander Sisera would fall at the hands of a woman came true.

After the battle, Deborah sang a song of praise to God for their victory (are you detecting a pattern here?), and in it she praised in particular, Jael, the woman who killed Sisera, calling her "Most blessed of women" (Judges 5:24). The same phrase that Elizabeth used to describe Mary. So far, the women that Mary has been linked to by Luke are not meek and mild women, but prophets and warriors.

So, according to the Bible, singing a victory song to God, especially one that so rouses the people to devotion that it gets recorded and preserved for posterity, is a pretty good indication that you might be a prophet. And being named after a prophet doesn't hurt either.

Are there other clues that Mary's joy goes beyond that of just an expectant mother's? There are.

Many prophets have a moment where they are identified by God, chosen and called to do a particular prophetic task. Often that moment inspires some initial fear and trembling. Hence the angel's, "Do not be afraid."

The prophets also sometimes have some questions about their worthiness or ability to carry out the task. Moses protests that he is slow of speech and slow of tongue. Jeremiah says that he is just a boy. Isaiah laments that he is a man of unclean lips.

And Mary? Well, Mary has some questions about how exactly she's going to have a baby since she's not yet married. And like the other prophets, Mary is assured that the power of God is sufficient. We have a quote on a little block on our house that says it well, "God doesn't call the qualified. God qualifies the called." Thanks be to God, right?

I heard an interview with a presidential candidate recently, who was asked if he felt prepared to be the leader of the free world, given that he didn't have very much experience in politics. I was shocked when he said that he absolutely felt prepared, 100% no doubt about it. I had just assumed that he would respond with something like, "I don't think anyone, no matter how much leadership experience they've had, could be fully prepared to be the President of the United States."

Prophets seem to know, or to quickly learn, that it isn't about them and their special abilities—it's about God and God's ability to work through us in spite of or sometimes through our very weakness. Mary lifts this good news up for all of us to hear in her Magnificat, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."

Another common feature of prophets is that they are potentially threatening to those in power. Traditionally, prophets have been given a word about who is to be the next King, not necessarily good news to the

current King. Or the prophet is one who provides a critique of the current king or religious leadership or of the nation as a whole.

Hence prophets like Elijah and Jeremiah faced real danger at the hands of their political enemies. And Mary was no different. By announcing to Mary that her son would be given “the throne of his ancestor David” in order to “reign over the house of Jacob forever,” Gabriel effectively made her a kingmaker of sorts. According to Matthew, Mary, Joseph, and the baby were forced to flee into Egypt as refugees to avoid Herod’s genocidal wrath.

Perhaps the most essential mark of a prophet though is being entrusted with God’s Word. Sometimes that means reminding people of God’s commandments, deeds of power or God’s past promises. Sometimes it means interpreting current events. And sometimes it means providing a warning or a promise about what the future holds or may hold.

We tend to think about prophecy as a prediction of the future, but God’s Word is relevant in the past, present and future tense. And that too is manifest in the word Mary receives and the word she speaks in the Magnificat. Gabriel tells Mary first about what WILL happen, and then Mary rejoices with Elizabeth in what is currently happening to them both. But she ends her Magnificat with a kind of battle cry in the past tense:

“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 forever.”

Is Mary saying that God's promise for the future is so trustworthy that it might as well be in the past tense—it's as good as happened? Or is she saying that her present joy and trust in the future promises of God is founded on her people's experience what God has done in the past? Perhaps her Word to us is in part that with God the three tenses can't be separated—past joy=present joy=future joy. They are intertwined and interdependent.

But we can't skip over the fact that Mary's joy isn't just a mother's joy. The whole last half of the Magnificat has nothing to do with pregnancy or motherhood. There is nothing meek or mild about it. Under God's reign, everything gets turned upside down. The hungry are fed, and the rich sent away empty. The lowly are lifted up, and the powerful brought down.

It's clear which Mary identifies with—she's among the lowly—a young unmarried Jewish woman in a no-account town in a territory occupied by a foreign power. And yet, by coming into the world in this particular way, through this particular woman, God has said, women's lives matter, poor lives matter, oppressed lives matter. And Mary is announcing it loud and proud. What she celebrates is the coming of God that turns the current social hierarchy on its head.

Here again are the potentially disturbing words of the prophet, spoken first to Elizabeth, and then through scripture to generation after generation of Christians for nearly two thousand years. An affliction to the comfortable, and a comfort to the afflicted. As God's Word has always been, is, and will be. As Jesus was, and is and will be.

Which brings us to the final way in which Mary is a prophet. Prophets are often called upon to embody the word given to them, to perform some kind of representative symbolic act. Hosea is asked to marry an unfaithful woman as a symbol of God's marriage to unfaithful Israel.

Jeremiah is asked to remain unmarried and childless as a sign of the bleakness of the immediate future. Ezekiel is asked to pack a bag and dig through Jerusalem's wall to symbolize the coming exile.

And Mary is asked to bear a child with no identifiable human father, as a sign and the incarnation of God's presence with us. Mary doesn't just bear God's Word through her speaking, she bears God's Word in her very body. Through her, the Word is made flesh.

Today we lit the candle for joy. And today we heard the joy, not just of an expectant mother, but of a prophet, asked to bear God's Word into a hurting world. Not all of us have the ability or desire to birth a baby, but all of us can be bearers of God's Word in a hurting world. Greetings, favored ones. The Lord is with you. There is no need to be afraid. That's good news we can all bear into the world with our words, and with our whole lives.

We can feed the hungry. We can visit the prisoner. We can sit with those who wait. We can hold those who mourn. We can make our speech loving and not ugly. We can pray for our enemies and be kind to our families and co-workers.

We can cast our lot with the lowly, like God does, like Jesus did, so that we too will experience God's coming to make all things new, including the social order, as good news. So that we too can boldly rejoice with Mary, that God's promise has been fulfilled, is being fulfilled, will be fulfilled and that all the families of the earth have been, are, and will be blessed through the children of Abraham.