

Advent 4, 2015

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro NC, The Rev. Audra Abt

Micah 5: 2-5a

Psalm 80:1-7

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-55

Picture John the Baptist, next to Mary.

(I know, this might sound strange, given what we just heard, but give me a little lead.)

Picture John the Baptist,

the John we've heard preaching repentance these past Sundays of Advent,
up to his chest in the Jordan river

dunking people who come to him, rich and poor and leaders and servants,
and singing out

"You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee the wrath to come?"

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,

my spirit REJOICES in God my savior.

God is merciful to those who fear the Lord, and God's arm is strong.

God casts down the mighty,

puts proud hearts and stubborn wills to flight, and lifts up the lowly.

Good things will the hungry receive, and

for those who have plenty, lean times will come.

For God's promises to Abraham and all his children are firm, and

God's mercy is sure for generations."

It actually works, except-

except for that first line, John the Baptist doesn't say this. Mary does.

"All hail, thou lowly maiden, Mary," says the angel Gabriel, (in the Gospel hymn)

"For know, a blessed Mother thou shalt be...

then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head: "to me be as it pleaseth God," she said. The hymns we sing
about Mary

give us cues to how our tradition wants us to think of her.

What words do we associate with Mary? [Humble, caring, faithful, obedient.

Meek, blessed Mother, lowly maiden.]

What words do we associate with prophets? [bold, loud, crazy, angry, righteous]

Like John the Baptist, right?

And yet Mary's Magnificat echoes prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel and Micah as much as any of John's words.

Why is it so easy for us to see John as prophetic but not Mary?

Because of course men are prophets,

brood of vipers preachin', rough camel hair wearin', locust eatin',

calling people to return to God.

But women, women are soft, nurturing.

Women are vessels in which things can grow.

Women speak in different tones and use other words for the Divine.

I know, I'm kind of setting us up here, but as I meditated on the Gospel and the times such as these that we live in, I had to wrestle with how to hear Mary's words. We are conditioned to hear and listen differently to men's and women's voices. Our tradition and hymns set us up that way to the point where we find ourselves sweetly singing Mary's words about the humble lifted high and the mighty being cast down from their thrones, as if they're just bland, syllables Mary comforts Elizabeth with,

as if Mary singing out God's promise to create a new reality and peace out of the humiliation and violence and domination in the world is all just an innocuous lullaby.

How we can hear Mary, not as meek and mild,
but as confident, faithful, strident prophet that she also is?

Mary, who nurtures the Word of God, not just in her uterus – which she does – but also in her own fervent, yearning soul.

Mary, who dares to see the significance of the life within her as not just for her own blessing but as a sign that God is not yet done with God's people, and even more that God has something more in store for the whole world to see.

Like the prophets before her and since, Mary points not to herself, but to God. Not to her own body, but to Christ's body, God's incarnate, living word among us.

In her song, the Magnificat we hear today, Mary boldly declares that God's hand is at work in the small, dark corners of our world, in the places that may not get airtime in the clamor of the nations, and in people from whom we may not expect to hear a prophetic word.

One place we may not expect to hear from Mary would be in a Mosque, right?

Well, we may be surprised to know that Mary is known, cherished, looked on prophetically in Islam, though her story is a bit different, and its place in the entire Muslim theology is different.

In the Quran she is known as Maryam. She is only 1 of 4 people to have a whole chapter of the Quran named for them, and her story goes like this:

Maryam's mother in her old age conceived by the God's power, and while Maryam was still in her womb, her mother promised her child to God for dedicated service to God.

Maryam is born and is raised by Zechariah and Elizabeth (we know them too, right?) and spends her days in the Jerusalem temple.

She is known as an exemplary young woman of Israel, holy and righteous and chaste. She studies the Torah and prays daily, and every time Zachariah comes in she was surrounded by food that had not been brought by anyone.

God provides for me, Maryam insists.

And then God in God's time chooses Maryam to bear a great prophet, Jesus.
God feeds Maryam in wilderness as she gives birth to Jesus, alone, at the foot of a palm tree.
No Joseph, no smelly stable with a roof, no wise men or gifts.
Just Maryam and God's providence.

When she returns to Jerusalem with the infant Jesus,
the elders and others treat her like so many women are treated:
they question her sexual integrity, shaming her and calling her a whore.

Maryam instead of defending herself, just points to the child to tell people to listen to him.
Muslims believe Jesus is one of greatest prophets, sent to draw people back to God,
and Maryam directs the people to listen to him and trust in God.

Mary and Maryam are not the same, and I don't think they have to be merged
in order for us to appreciate their prophetic vocations.

They don't just successfully carry Jesus to term;
they bear God's penetrating Word within them, and
they proclaim it out loud, courageously, unabashedly...
like prophets:
bold, faithful, God-fearing, God-loving, **prophets.**

We need prophets.

God sends us prophets, messengers, like Mary and Maryam,
to invite us to be open to the new things God is doing.

We may not always be ready to hear prophets.
Sometimes we cannot hear them because they are harsh like John.

But other times, we just may not recognize prophets
for their humble appearance or where they come from or
their unfamiliar way of speaking of God.

We may not like how they say what they have to say, but what if
part of Advent listening, Advent seeking, is learning to listen especially to those
whose story we think we already know,
who the world has already decided cannot come from God,
whose voices are easily dismissed.

For such are the voices of the prophets of old whom God chooses and sends
with their words that call forth a new humanity, a new world.

They are often dismissed and come from unexpected places,
but the prophets are our guides back to life in sync with God and God's will.
The prophets call on us to return,
not to the God we think we know, not to tepid imitations,
but to the God who is Lord of all creation, who promises not only life but salvation, freedom,
a way forward when no way seems open.

Maryam and Mary's witness to us
is that God's mercy is everlasting, and it is for every one of us.

God does feed and fill the hungry with good things.

God remembers and keeps God's promises of life
to Abraham and his children - ALL his children – forever.

May God help us to listen.

May God inspire prophets who will surprise us, wake us up, and
help us to sing and maybe even shout our faith anew, and

let our lives tell out our own witness that God is great, and

all the darkness, all the fear,

all the divisions and hatred and

humiliations and domination

that are tearing our souls to shreds...

In Jesus,

God's love and mercy will outlast and outlive them all.

In Jesus, a light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness will never overcome it.