

Sing of Mary with her Fist in the Air

The Rev. Barbara Ballenger

When I was a kid, I was taught some very specific things about Mary, the mother of Jesus. I learned these things through the songs we sang at church, through the stories I was told about her, prayers that we prayed, and rituals like the spring May crowning where we put a wreath of flowers on her statue.

I learned things like: Mary always wore blue. She was meek and mild, and always obedient. She was always clean and pure. She was born without sin – the fancy word for this is the Immaculate Conception. She was a perfect daughter – so we girls were taught to act like her. And she was a perfect mother – so we mothers were told to be like her. Which was a pretty tall order when none of us ever felt immaculate, or perfect, or obedient or even meek or mild for the most part.

A few years ago, my daughter got me a T-shirt for Christmas that had a different image of Mary on it.

This Mary was a young girl with strands of hair escaping from her veil, standing with her fist in the air, like this. And the words above her said “Cast down the mighty”! and below her they read “Send the rich away!” To her right are the words “Fill the hungry” and to her left it says “Lift the lowly.” She’s standing on a dead snake, one foot on a skull, poised as though she’s riding a skateboard.

“This T-shirt reminded me of you,” my daughter said. “It’s from the bible, right?”

She was right – this Mary came right out of the bible. No blue clothes, no meek and mild, no clean fingernails. This is the Mary of today’s readings.

And those words that surround her on my T-shirt, they are from the prayer that we read after our first reading, called the Magnificat. It’s actually the song that Mary sings after she greets her relative Elizabeth, which is the story we heard in today’s version of Luke’s Gospel.

Our translation of Mary’s song put it this way:

God is strong enough to scatter proud people in every direction.

God picks up those who think they're better than anyone else, and flings them off their fancy chairs, but he picks up those who are sad and lifts up their chins so they can hold their heads high again.

No matter how you translate the words, this does not sound like a very meek or mild teenager. Rather it sounds like someone who has a great longing for how she wants the world to be for her people Isreal, and for all people. It sounds like someone filled with gratitude that it was already happening, so full that her soul magnified the Lord and her spirit rejoiced in God her savior.

It sounds like someone who is thrilled with the great thing that God was doing with her life.

What was this great thing that had happened to Mary? Why was she visiting her relative Elizabeth, and why were they both so happy?

Well, let's back up a bit to the previous chapter in the Gospel of Luke. There we learn that Mary had a relative named Elizabeth who was getting on in years. She and her husband Zechariah, who was a priest, had never been able to have children, and now they were too old to hope to have a baby. But one day an angel appeared to Zechariah to say the couple would have a son. They were to name him John. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit and prepare his people for the Lord's coming.

Six months went by. Then the angel paid a visit to Mary. The angel told her that because God was so drawn to Mary's great faith, she would have a special baby through the power of the Holy Spirit. She was to name him Jesus. He would be a king like David and would be called the Son of God. And if that wasn't enough, the Angel told Mary that her aging relative Elizabeth was already six months pregnant with John the Baptist. That did it. Mary said "let it be done to me according to your will."

Then she set out to talk to Elizabeth.

Now Elizabeth and Zachariah lived about 80 miles away from Mary in a town outside of Jerusalem. If you're driving on the Yitzak Rabin Highway, it would take you about an hour and half to get there from where Mary lived in Nazareth, according to Google Maps. But Mary was walking, according to the Gospel of Luke, so I imagine that took a few days, about 16 hours of walking in all, not counting time to rest and sleep and eat.

Which brings us to today's Gospel, when Mary, whom I imagine was sweaty and tired and probably a bit dehydrated from morning sickness after all that walking, landed in Elizabeth's warm welcoming embrace. And what both women felt was joy. Because they both carried miracles inside of them, promises that leapt with happiness even before they were born. Mary was a young woman, and Elizabeth was an old woman. But as the angel said, nothing is impossible with God. This is a great description of the faith that Elizabeth and Mary had: a faith that nothing is impossible with God.

Imagine what it must have felt like, to each have the other to share their miracle with, to compare notes and to talk about what God was doing through them. I think my soul would magnify the Lord, too. And that is why right after Mary and Elizabeth greet one another, Mary begins her song of praise to God. The usual translation starts like this:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,

my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; *
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.

From this day all generations will call me blessed: *
the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.

If you listen to this great song of Mary, you'll see that Mary isn't just happy for herself, bearing a king like David inside her. She is happy for her people, God's people, and any who are lowly, and hungry and waiting to be delivered from those who take more than their fair share and abuse their power and their might.

She's not meek. Not mild. Certainly not immaculate after an 80 mile walk with no shower facilities along the way. But Mary is defiant, and radiant, and confident that God would even the playing field for God's people, for all people. This was her hope for the baby inside of her, that was her understanding of God's promise.

Mary would stay until Elizabeth delivered John the Baptist three months later. Then Mary would make the long walk home. And six months after that she'd make another journey, this time to Bethlehem, according to Luke's Gospel. It seems like Mary never got much time to put her feet up when she was pregnant with Jesus. Her life wasn't that easy. She lived in a poor part of Israel. She longed for things to change dramatically for her people. And she believed it when the angel said it was going to happen.

The idea that I had about Mary growing up was that you had to be perfect to carry Jesus inside you, to give birth to God's promises. But I don't think it was the quality of her behavior that attracted God's attention to Mary. It was the quality of her faith that all things were possible with God – even that her people would be delivered from rulers who oppressed them, from leaders who misled them. And I think she also had an unrelenting faith that God would make that vision possible through her, not because she deserved it or had earned it but because she was open to it, if asked she would say yes. And she did.

I think that faith ran in the family, which is why she spent so much time with her relative Elizabeth, learning from her, caring for her, sharing with her. The two of them in their Advent time together knew something of the secret plan of God before anyone else. They had a glimpse into what God was doing before anyone else even knew that salvation was on the way.

So on this fourth Sunday of Advent, let's savor the joyful secret that Mary and Elizabeth shared, as tiny and as promising as a baby in the womb, as powerful as the word "yes" to God's invitation to bear the divine light into the world. Amen.