



## Sermons from Northwood United Church

"Peace, and other eccentricities"

Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

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May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives, be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Do you know anyone you would call eccentric? There is a researcher at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, Dr. David Weeks, who has been searching for eccentrics, studying them, writing about them, has a website (<http://celebratingeccentrics.com/about-dr-weeks/>) and a book about it called "Eccentrics- a Study of Sanity and Strangeness." He tells of the Scottish botanist whose life work is potatoes. He reads books like "The History and Social Influence of the Potato," and subscribes to "Potato News." He eats 4-5 pounds of potatoes a day. There is the Yorkshire man named Jake "the rake" Mangelwurzels, who lectures sheep from a pulpit atop his farmhouse about the evils of conformity! There is also the "Barking Vicar" of Berkshire whose sermons and scripture readings feature animal growls and other sound effects. Wouldn't you like it if I were such an eccentric?

Dr. Weeks writes, "[My] research has shown that certain types of deviant behavior can be healthy and life-enhancing. The condition of eccentrics is freedom: not for them the stifling habit of obedience. In an era when human beings seem more and more to be prisoners of their culture and their genes, eccentrics are a refreshing reminder of every person's uniqueness."

Eccentrics, according to Dr. Weeks, can often be identified by their looks: unfashionable clothes, mismatched socks, uncombed hair, and a distracted air. I think there is often something else, and it has something to do with uncommon hope.

It has been said that "a prophet is one who hears an octave higher than the rest of us." A prophet then, has a different understanding of what is real and true and good. A prophet is always in the minority, in some instances a minority of one. What the prophet hears sets him or her apart from the rest of us, makes the label eccentric utterly appropriate.

And here is the different truth that the eccentric Mary has heard- the truth an octave higher- that God is indeed merciful, and that God's mercy is to be known in this- that the natural order of precedence and rank is turned on its head. That is the eccentric mercy of God, the eccentric truth, the weirdness that Mary sings- the proud scattered, the mighty dethroned, while the humble are lifted, the hungry filled while the rich are sent away empty, which, if you are in Mary's shoes, is good news indeed.

Mary is often characterized as a sweet humble blessed virgin who didn't have much to say, and whose thoughts and convictions are not important to think about. The important thing is that she gave birth to Jesus right? But that's not what the bible says. Mary was a young woman of substance, a prophet and an eccentric. All you have to do is listen to her song. Mary sings the dream of a big change brought about by God- a change in the common order of things, an uncommon change, a miraculous one, a change perceptible only by the eccentrics, the prophets and those who hear an octave higher than the rest of us.

Last week as Advent began I invited you to listen carefully for the song of God which has the power to awaken us, to wake us up to the powerful and tender activity of God in our hearts, in our minds, in our world. And today in our gospel reading, Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, her sister, and they contemplated the children in their wombs and the world into which these children are about to be born. Young Jewish peasant girls living under the brutal thumb of Imperial

Rome. And the kind of song that awakens in Mary, the song that she heard an octave higher than the rest of us was not a lullaby, not the jingle of bells, not even an angel choir, sweet and clean. No it was a song of social revolution. It was a song of tables turning, of the mighty brought low, of the poor and lowly rising up, of the hungry fed and the rich sent away empty handed. And given her and her sister's position in the social and political geography of her world, it was a good news song indeed.

But on this day when we light the candle of peace, how might it be considered a song of peace? Sounds more disruptive than that- an eccentric vision in a world in which peace was won by victory, by conquering. Remember, she lived under Pax Romana they called it- the peace of Rome and the Roman Legion enforced the peace. Peace was the absence of war and the squashing of dissent. Political peace was won at the expense of people like Mary, Elizabeth, their children.

But on the higher frequency of Mary's song, Pax Romana is replaced with peace through justice, through the radical reordering of our relationships, personal, economic, social. Oh, for some of us it doesn't come across as very peaceful. For the 1% it is utterly disruptive, but it is a light in the darkness for the bottom 60%. And for Mary, Elizabeth and their family and for the unborn children, they had tuned in to a song of peace built on a different foundation.

And in our world and our time, peace may seem like an eccentric vision. On the 26th anniversary of the massacre at L'ecole Polytechnic in Montreal when violence was rooted in fear of people like Mary, in the prevailing climate of fear of organizations like ISIS when violence can pop up anywhere, when millions seek asylum from violence, the instinct is to enforce peace, to build walls, to send in the troupes, not to re-order our relationships.

You see, as we approach the big day upon which we celebrate the birth of the dreamed about, sung for one, are we able to tune our hearts to a higher frequency, that of the prophets and eccentrics who can perceive the miraculous shifts of power and a peace founded on justice not violence?

That is what we try to tune in to. A minority vision, an eccentric one. While the vast majority eat Cheerios and codfish, cantaloupe and Christmas Cake, there is one at least who eats nothing but potatoes; while the vast majority comb their hair and wear matching socks, there are some who have fly away hair and wear blue and green Argyle on one foot and a pink and purple toe sock on the other. And while the vast majority see only the darkness and feel only the chill based on a steady diet of bad news, and sense only the odds stacked against their dreams coming true, there are eccentrics like Mary, and perhaps there is an eccentric bone in your body too, hearing an octave higher and knowing that the light is coming into the world. The great reversal is taking place before our eyes, and if not there, at least in our hearts.

As another eccentric, Daniel Berrigan once said, "We stand on the brink of the unknown- which is to say that things are normal, and good, and permissive of joy" and I would add, permissive of peace. Amen