

Sermon – Advent 4

We are nearing the end of 2020. I don't think I was prepared to begin this decade in quite this way. It has been (at times) a year, preceded by a decade of uncertainty and uneasiness, and even fear. The last year has brought us to often searching for a prophet...someone who will predict the future.

Of course the truth of the matter is that prophets aren't mainly in the business of predicting the future. The bible is full of accounts of prophets, and sometimes they did predict the future. But more important, a prophet was someone called by God to share God's dream—speaking and acting on God's behalf. The bible is full of accounts of the calling of the prophets, when they were given a task to do.

Mary is not usually called a prophet, but there is reason to think of her as one. Mary, the young girl from Nazareth was called by God to give birth to a child, Jesus the holy child of God. You've heard the story of how an angel came to tell her that God had chosen her. You might have a few pictures, on the walls of your mind, of the scene of the Annunciation. That scene has been painted by great artists—Leonardo, Botticelli —there are many paintings of this scene showing an angel kneeling before a beautiful lady robed in splendid silks. There is often a stem of white lilies between them, symbolizing her purity. Those painting show the elevated Mary—the Mary who has been on a pedestal above ordinary women. But those painting tell us more about the world of the court painters who made them than they do about Mary—the girl from rural Palestine, a girl from Nazareth, a town hardly noticed by Jerusalem and of no importance to Rome. So let's look at her in a different way and call her by her first century Palestine name: Mar'yam. Mar'yam is the name of the young prophet from Nazareth in her native language. Let us “invite her down from the pedestal where she has been honored in the past, to rejoin us on the ground of the community of grace in history.” What would a new, more realistic painting, look like?

Picture in your minds eye:

There are hills in the distance, and some dark green trees. Near the center of the picture is a young Jewish woman. She is fourteen or fifteen years old, with long, black hair tied back by a scarf. A donkey is walking in a circle, its harness tied to a stake in the ground. It is pulling a threshing board to separate the grain from the chaff. The grain and chaff are being combed into a circular path under the donkey's feet. Mar'yam stands in the hot sun, under the blue sky, clapping her hands and calling to the donkey to keep walking. Her skin is brown like her people, and browner from the sun. As she reaches down to pull away the chaff, a man appears—a stranger. Mar'yam is startled, but he quickly greets her in such a way that she is not afraid. At that moment, she is more puzzled at his appearance, and his words. He tells her that God is with her. He tells her that she is going to conceive a child from the Holy Spirit. Mar'yam recognizes this as God's word to her, and her only question is: how is this possible? The messenger tells her that with God, nothing is impossible. And Mar'yam consents. She knows well the danger she faces. The penalty for an engaged woman in her community who is pregnant outside of marriage is death by stoning. The messenger leaves as suddenly as he came, and Mar'yam hastily departs on a journey from Galilee to Judea.

Mar'yam heads for the hills, to stay with her relative—call her by her Hebrew name: Elisheva. Elisheva understands at once what has happened, and Mar'yam is able to tell her what God has given her to do. Few of Mar'yam's words are recorded in the scriptures, and the best known is her joyful song: the *Magnificat*. Words from her faith...words from the Hebrew Scripture - Hannah upon the birth of Samuel:

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

Mar'yam calls herself lowly, which could mean that she is humble before God. She is also humble as a result of her life experience, a life experience of humiliation—the humiliation of a

poor, vulnerable girl living under the oppression of the double taxation of Herod and the Roman Empire, in a climate of suppressed violence.

There are many similarities between Mar'yam's life and the lives of so many poor women in the modern world today. She gave birth in a homeless situation as an unmarried girl; then, eventually, she and Joseph fled as refugees with their toddler to a strange land to escape being killed by military action.

And yet, she rejoices in what God is calling her to do—she is bringing to birth the long awaited Messiah. Mar'yam sings for joy at what that means for the people of Israel. In her song we hear prophetic speech—a rallying cry for the poor and fearful to overcome evil and violence. This Mar'yam is not a passive, ethereal being detached from the suffering of her people. She is of her people, of her family and her land—a Jewish woman of faith, a holy soul who is a prophet and a friend of God.

Jesus came from her humanity, just as he comes from God. She was a young woman, without resources or power but she participated in the redemption of God's people, of her people.

Call her Mar'yam or Mary—this joyful, prophetic song is the longest speech placed on the lips of any woman in the whole New Testament. It is a freedom song. She looks into God's time and sees salvation already accomplished. **When we need to know the truth, we listen to Mary.** Mary's song rings in our ears, and calls us to disrupt the hold violence and hatred and bigotry has on our world. She sings of a future where all children are safe from violence. She sings of a future where people have homes and food and jobs. Her words are in solidarity with us. She sees to the far horizon and sings of the coming reign of God. We will be fed, and we will feed others. We will be blessed and we will bless others. We will receive justice, and we will do justice to others. All things are possible with God.

Mary sings of a future worth struggling for. It is a song with a marching beat—she sets our feet on the path of unfinished business. She sings prophetically, she sings about something that hasn't happened yet. She sings of a hopeful vision for the future because she can see farther than the rest of us, and she keeps us from giving in and giving up. She sings to keep our hearts full of hope. We need to hear that song over and over again.

Today, the Magnificat holds as much weight and power for God's people as it did in the first Century. A song of a prophetess asking us to share in God's dream. We only need to hear and respond. Amen.