

24 December 2023; 4 Advent B
Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
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[4 Advent, Year C: 2 Samuel 7:1-11,16; The Song of Mary; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38]

She said yes. Yes. Yes. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Yes.

I suppose it’s possible to read today’s Gospel so that Mary is simply submitting to the pre-ordained. Pure, yielding humility, submission, self-erasure. It HAS been read that way.

But, really?

The text as we heard it says that Mary was “engaged” to a man named Joseph, but that choice of words can be misleading to our ears. “Betrothed” would be a better translation, and according to the custom of the time that would have meant that the marriage was a done deal—the dowry already paid, for example—only dissolvable by death or divorce.

Again, according to the customs of the time Mary, very likely 12, 13 or 14 years old at the time, was still living as a member of her own father’s household; but all that remained was to move to Joseph’s household and the physical consummation of the marriage. As a girl, and as a woman of her time and place, she would be defined by her submissive relationship to a man: first father, then husband.

So, when Mary says that she is the servant *of the Lord*, she is identifying herself as belonging now to the household of the Lord, God of Israel and creator of heaven and earth. She is saying that she will now be defined by her relationship with God, not father and not husband. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord”; those are brave words, audacious,

courageous words. Words, you might say, of a girl who has always wanted to be *more* than her culture could allow or imagine.

I think you can hear that more in the Song of Mary (the *Magnificat*) that we sang as today’s psalm. It’s Mary unleashed:

From this day, all generations will call me blessed!

Last week, we had the question: “Who are you?” The religious authorities put that question to John the Baptist; and the preacher, Stephen, put the same question to each of us: Who are you? And that question has been resonating for me this week, pondering Mary. Who are *you*, Mary, ever-blessed, mother of Jesus, mother of God?

When God, through the angel, calls Mary to become the mother of the Savior, it can only be because God has created her for this purpose. It can only be if this vocation is in deep accord with *who she is*, not simply as an instrument, a vessel, a tool. We may use such language from time to time—“make me an instrument of your peace,” for example. But is that what God *really* desires? To use us as tools?

What the gospel reveals to us is a God who is not so much looking for instruments, tools, vessels; God is looking for collaborators, companions, co-workers, co-conspirators, friends, lovers. Servants, yes, absolutely, but only to the extent that God reveals Godself to be, at heart, a servant, as Jesus will show us.

The humility we are called to is finally not submission to a towering, overwhelming and *other*

power, but a *participation* in the humility and servanthood that is *always already who God really is*. God's power and might is really nothing other than that absolute humility, that unquenchable love, boundless compassion, and radiant bliss that nothing and no one can thwart.

All this will be revealed in Jesus, but here is Mary, already showing it forth, "the mystery that was kept secret for long ages," as Paul puts it in today's reading from Romans, "but... now disclosed... according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith."

Again, this "obedience" is not subservience to some alien and threatening other, but is rather the liberation of participating in God's love, God's humility, and in doing so to become who we really are, as Jesus will show us, as Mary today is already showing us.

And perhaps there's something to remark on and to ponder today about children, and childhood. Mary is, after all, according to the customs of the time, probably all of twelve, thirteen, or fourteen when Jesus is conceived. According to the customs of *our* time, a child. And one part of childhood is that it is generally a time when we adults, and parents in particular, try to shield these young persons from having to make major decisions that will determine the whole future trajectory of their lives.

Ideally, we want to protect them and keep their options open while they develop emotionally, psychologically, as well as physically, acquiring skills and competencies to understand and navigate the world before they make decisions they will have to live with for the rest of their lives. And I think that's all well and good and appropriate. But perhaps it can go too far, to the point where we consider children less than complete human beings, or to the point where adults think they can take over the shaping of the child's future—or manage the child's relationship with God.

We may not see it every day, but child is capable of knowing who they are. So it is very interesting, it seems to me, that Luke's Gospel, in contrast to Matthew, not only gives us a Mary story rather than a Joseph story, centering the women rather than the

men, but also a story about a child, rather than an adult.

Remember the story of Jesus, age 12, gone missing in Jerusalem and eventually discovered in the temple in deep conversation with the scholars, in Luke, chapter 2? The point of that story, you might say is that Jesus, as a child *knows who he is*. Mary, in chapter 1, is probably just a little older than Jesus in that story in chapter 2.

Mary is revealed as intelligent, inquisitive, brave, and fully capable of a momentous decision, a cosmic decision, a YES that will join heaven and earth and reverberate for "all generations." Perhaps Isaiah's prophecy, "And a little child shall lead them" might be best understood as finding its fulfillment in Mary of Nazareth.

Mary, both as mother and as child, would I think want to show us that any child, at any moment, can be a prophet of the Most High, a person whose insight, words, and actions can change everything.

I mentioned earlier the passage from Romans, where Paul speaks of "the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed... according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith."

In the letter to the Colossians he uses similar language, but expands on it a bit differently:

I became [a] servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints... which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. [Colossians 1:25-27]

That's the "mystery kept secret for long ages but... now disclosed": Christ in you, Christ in me, the hope of glory.

However literally or not you take today's story, it shows us this mystery in strikingly bodily terms: Mary, conceiving Christ in her body, carrying the

divine presence within her, nourishing and protecting it, feeling its energy, dreaming its future.

Christ in you, Christ in Mary, Christ in me, the hope of glory, Christ everywhere, in everyone, the hope of all things reaching their fulfillment in peace, in consolation, in celebration.

Christ is in you, by virtue of your baptism, yes, by virtue of your faithfulness, yes, but way before that, by virtue of your creation, by virtue of your existence: Christ, who fills all things, is in you, the hope of glory.

Mary is the abiding icon of this truth of our existence.

The light of Christ is in you as surely as Mary carried Jesus in her womb.

And so she carries each of us, and this suffering world, right now.