Mary as Preacher, Prophet and Model

Luke 1:39-55
December 20, 2009

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference." (Serenity Prayer) Most of us know this as the Serenity Prayer. Today as we look at Mary as mother of Jesus, let us also look at her through the lens of "change agent." We may also see her as prophet, preacher, and model. Her message in what is known as the Magnificat or "Mary's Song" shows us a courageous young woman, who accepts the will of God for her life while challenging us to do the same as she expresses to us the transformative power of God. Mary challenges us to share our understanding of what God can do in our lives and in the world around us. Mary's message challenges us to share who God is in our lives and in the world through our words and our actions. We are to share God's vision of a transformed world in what we say and in how we live our lives.

Often times when we look to images and depictions of Mary what do we see? A meek, often times pale figure with clasped hands either looking up to heaven or with her eyes caste down. I suggest to you today a different vision of who Mary was. She was a poor teenager in the care of her uncle, betrothed to an older man. We are unclear of what has happened to her parents. I think it would be fair to say that Mary had dealt with grief and loss early in life. She was considered lowly and marginalized according to the standards of her time. So, when we look at today's gospel message we have the angel Gabriel appear to a poor, marginalized teenage girl to tell her that she is "highly favored" and chosen by the Lord to birth the Son of the Most High. (Luke 1:28, 32) This is a message of hope for you and I. God chooses the ordinary, the common, the lowly, those considered outcast to do God's will in the world. We find promise that we, too, are favored by God.

We, are God's children, just as Mary and as Jesus. How would we respond if an angel appeared before us and told us that God had a plan for our lives? How do we respond to Jesus' teachings that God has a plan for our lives? Do we live into the hope, the promise, and will God has for our lives or do we stand in fear? Let us look again at Mary. She was bold enough to actually question Gabriel. She wanted to know how this was going to happen. Gabriel explained the Holy Spirit would come upon her and he shared with her that even her relative, Elizabeth was going to bear a child. Mary would not be alone in her pregnancy and would have the power of the Holy Spirit within her and the love and acceptance of her relative Elizabeth as well should she agree to what God was asking of her. Elizabeth was married to the Temple priest, Zechariah which gave her a modicum of acceptance within her community. But, for a woman of this time to be barren and not produce a male heir she was looked down upon and viewed as somehow accursed by God. Now, we know that to not be true. But, this was the culture of Elizabeth and Mary's time. We have God acting not only in the life of Mary, but Elizabeth's also.

We have both Mary and Elizabeth saying yes to the will of God for their lives. In essence these women consented as Jesus did in saying, "Not my will, but thy will be done." God chose two of the most unsuspecting, unassuming women in which to birth John the Baptist and Jesus. Without either of whom, we most likely would not be. God chose the most common to do the most extraordinary in the life of all of creation. As the Rev. Peter Gomes once stated, "Mary held in her arms the God of love that we might hold in our hearts the love of God." Mary is not only the mother of Jesus, the mother of God, Mary is the mother of the church, and in a very real way Mary is the mother of our faith, because Mary said yes to God.[1] It was in their saying yes to God that both women not only transformed the world, but they themselves were also transformed in the process. Not in a superficial way. Elizabeth did not say to the unwed,

[1] The Reverend Robert G. Trache. "From the Mary's – Luke 1:39-56"; GoodPreacher.com

pregnant teenage Mary, "Don't worry," or "Look on the bright side, you are giving birth to our Savior" or "There's always some good that comes out of a bad situation; you just have to find it." No, Elizabeth said to Mary, "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished." (Luke 1:45) These women were transformed emotionally and spiritually. For Mary, saying "yes" to God in this way was a danger to her life, her reputation, and her future. This was not an easy decision, but required a strong faith in the presence and promises of God. Mary had to be bold to have faith in God to risk the ridicule, shame and possible stoning to death as an unwed girl who had become pregnant. In saying yes, she was transformed.

God's word, God's promises remain transformative for each of us today as well, but we must be willing to courageously stand on faith trusting that "what the Lord has said to [us] will be accomplished." We are to be transformed emotionally and spiritually. This may require some struggling on our part. Like the Serenity prayer says, it may mean accepting some things we don't want to accept or changing in some ways that we don't think that we can.[2]

What Mary is preaching and teaching us is that "*God has put down the powerful from their thrones and exalted those of low degree; God has filled the hungry with good things and the rich God has sent away empty." (Magnificat; Luke 1:46-55)* Here we see Mary as a prophet on behalf of the marginalized, oppressed, poor and exploited. She is proclaiming liberation. How are we called to help the poor, marginalized, oppressed and exploited today? Our church seeks to meet the needs of others through our financial contributions to the five missionary outreach programs within the United Church of Christ, we have adopted families through Operation Bootstraps "Holiday Basket" program, we provide one meal each month to the

[2] Traci West. "Mother Vision: On Justice and Social Transformation; *The Book of Women's Sermons: Hearing God in Each Other's Voices"* p.262-69

Salvation Army Hope Center, we collect food monthly for the local food pantries and we sponsor a child in Pakistan. While all of these are ways in which God asks us to provide we still must ask ourselves, "Am I giving my best to God or am I giving what is left over?" The food that is brought for the food pantry, is it food that you would eat or food that you would feed to your family. Why would we give something to others that we would not want, not merely because we don't like it, but because it has expired, is stale or totally unusable? We are called to give our best in service to God. That in turn means giving our best to one another.

Our best also means holding those in power accountable for the choices they make and the subsequent consequences to the greater good of all of creation. While we must acknowledge that there have been tyrants who have remained in power, we find in the Magnificat and throughout our Bible stories that God's will is for benevolent, competent, and stable government and political leaders. In lifting up the lowly, God honors those who see power as a responsibility from God. The church has a responsibility to call those in power to this ideal.[3] We have a responsibility to give voice to the many social justice issues that plague our sisters and brothers in our community, in this country and around the world. To live as a people of faith in what is espoused as a Christian nation means that no one should go to bed hungry, no one should b e without healthcare, everyone should have appropriate housing, our children should receive an equal education, and there should be equal justice for all. To live as a people of faith we are called to concern ourselves with the damage we have caused to the earth's ecosystems and make changes to try and heal the wounds we have created. We are called to stand together as a people of faith, seeking to create and live into the vision God has for us and our world. No, we cannot do it all, but we are called to effect change in as many places as we can.

[3] Charles Aaron. GoodPreacher.com

When we look to Mary and Elizabeth in today's gospel message we see women who stood together. They understood that although the journey they were on was part of God's will for their lives, it would not be easy for them. They needed to stand together in faith and in prayer. I had lunch with one of the local ministers a few weeks ago and as we were sharing with one another what it means to be women in ministry, she shared with me, "You know Chantel, I have never prayed for my sons to be happy because I know that in this world they will endure pain and heartache. My prayer for my sons has always been that God would give them the courage to remain faithful because it is so easy to lose faith. Also if they are men of faith then joy will come to them. The temptation to not believe is great when you look at the world around you and truly see the brokenness and need. It takes courage to stand firm in faith." I understood this mother's prayer for her children. To be the children of God we are called to be requires courage and a belief in the transformative power of God for our lives and the world around us.

During this Advent and Christmas season let us be transformed by God's vision for our lives and for our world. It will require us to stand before God in prayer saying: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference." (Serenity Prayer) Dare to let your soul magnify our God. Let God's vision be reflected in your thoughts and in your hearts. As Mary's story so beautifully modeled for us, let us share with others that they too are valued children of God. Let us be as bold and gutsy as Mary, trusting in God's love to sustain us and grant us courage. How can we recommit ourselves to a life of service to God offering only the best we have to give? In what ways are we going to move forward? It is my prayer that we are as bold as Mary who said yes to God; Mary who lived her life in service to God's will; and Mary who boldly pursued God's vision for the world. Amen.