

## Mary's Song

### Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C – Luke 1:39-55

*preached by the Rector at St. Pau's, Henderson, December 20, 2015*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

In the springtime of the year, when days are longer and brighter... and warmer, in the beautiful month of May, the Church Year calls us to celebrate a feast known as the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Gospel reading for that day is the same one we just heard, the story of Mary, who hurries to share the promise of an angel with her elderly cousin Elizabeth, who is herself miraculously expecting the child we will come to know as that camel-skin-wearing prophet of the wilderness, John. Now here we are, when days are at their shortest, when the long, cold nights seem to go on forever, and as part of the last of our preparation for Christmas, we hear again this story of *the* Visitation.

We know the story, of course, because we have heard it so often. An angel, the *archangel* Gabriel is sent with an astonishing message for a young woman named Mary, who, according to the customs of her time, was betrothed to a man in David's line, but who, according to the customs of her time, was probably still just a teenaged girl. Mary has listened to the angel's monumental message, that she is to be the mother of the promised Anointed One of her people, she is to be the bearer of the savior of the whole *world*, and in human history's most courageous exercise of faith, Mary says, "yes." Even though this miraculous pregnancy seems to mean the end of her betrothal, and every *other* relationship she holds dear, Mary says, "yes." Even though she knows full well the tragic and final penalty that is prescribed for a woman in her scandalous situation, Mary says, "yes." Even though she knows from the very *beginning* that this gift, this promise will bring her own heart grief and suffering, Mary says, "yes." To motherhood at its most scandalous, its most remarkable... its most miraculous, Mary says, "yes."

Mary says, "yes." But with Gabriel's message still ringing in her ears, it seems that in doing so, Mary has been brought, all in a rush, to a dark, lonely, blank stone wall. And then, remarkably, miraculously, scandalously, one barrier after another... collapses. Remarkably, Joseph is shown his *own* vision of the road before them, and refuses to put her aside. Scandalously, no one, *no* one picks up the first stone of condemnation for the young mother to be. And then word reaches her that she is not alone in this miracle, that there is another who shares in the promise. So Mary gets up, and hurries to see the fulfillment of that promise.

Now, it's not uncommon, of course, for babies to move in the womb. Mothers throughout the history of the human experience have felt their babies kick and stretch and roll. I remember the joy Jenny and I had when each of our boys did *their* first calisthenics. But when Mary called out to Elizabeth, unborn John apparently did a lot more than *kick*. John, we are told, absolutely jumped for joy! With her own miracle leaping within her, the Holy Spirit filled Elizabeth with a voice that John's father wouldn't have until well after his birth. "Blessed are you among women," she cries out to her visitor, "and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Elizabeth is the first to utter this prayer, but hardly the last. Maybe you know that prayer of promise from its traditional opening phrase, "Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you." Or maybe you know it best from the Latin version, set so many times to music, "Ave Maria." "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb," Elizabeth says. "You are blessed because of the child you carry." "You are blessed for believing that what the Lord told you *would* come true." "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb," the older woman says, not so much *offering* blessing to the younger, but proclaiming the superabundant blessing that is so obviously already hers.

And then, it's as if the scene at Elizabeth's home just about turns into sacred opera. In response to Elizabeth's prayerful proclamation, Mary does not speak, so much as she *sings*. You heard the song a moment ago, just like you've heard it many times before. We call that song *Magnificat*, again from the Latin version used by the Church for so many centuries. In our own language, we sometimes just call it,

“The Song of Mary.” But Mary’s song is not some syrupy, self-indulgent, sentimental ditty. The song that Mary sings when she hears the confirmation of the promise that she has been pondering in her heart, the Song of Mary, the *Magnificat*, is a remarkable, miraculous... and *scandalous* celebration of her God – and ours. Mary sings of her God who saves, the one who looks with favor on a humble servant, the one who does great things, the Holy One whose name itself is holy. Mary sings of her God of justice and mercy, the one who is known by those who reverence him, the one who shows his arm to be mighty as he who scatters the proud, and throws down the powerful, and throws out the rich, the one who lifts up the lowly, and leads the hungry not just to *enough*... but to a rich *banquet*. Mary sings of her God who keeps the promises he has made, to *all* those that have gone before us. Mary sings of *our* God, who *has* done, and *continues* to do remarkable, and miraculous, and sometime even scandalous, crazy things to bring his Kingdom, his *dream* to our life.

*This* is the God of the Song of Mary. *This* is the God who *sets* Mary to singing. Because Mary’s Song is about her delight that a blank, stone wall has turned out to be a great wide door to the fullness and goodness of heaven. Mary’s Song is about her realization that this is what God has been talking about all along, throughout the whole *history* of God’s people. Mary’s Song is about her absolute joy in being a witness to, even a *participant* in what God was and *is* doing.

And here, within skipping distance of Christmas, within days of our yearly celebration of the child that gave voice to Mary’s exultation, within hours, really of our Feast of the Incarnation, the remarkable, the miraculous, the *scandalous* breaking of God into the flow of human history, Mary’s joy invites *us* to delight with the favored one in the God who turns the world upside down, the God who lifts up the lowly and fills the hungry with good things, the God who saves even us, through one quiet promise, and through one young girl’s faith and courage. Mary’s joy points us always, *always* to her Son, our first, best promise, our only redeemer, and unlocks the very door of the whole of Christian joy.

Of course, there’s more to Mary’s Song, but you’ll just have to come back later in the week to hear the next stanza.