

“Mary, Anticipating”

Luke 1: 26-38

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

December 8, 2019

Second Sunday in Advent

“Here and now, in a graceless, hopeless, and brutal world,
the light of grace breaks the darkness of hopelessness.” -- H. Russel Botma

This advent, we are looking at 4 main characters that lead up to the birth of Jesus.

Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph and today, Mary.

The first time I encountered Mary, I was in grade school. I saw her from playground in first grade. The Catholic Church was right on the other side of the swing set. You would swing, and see her, in the midst of the rose garden, 3 feet tall, concrete statue painted stark white, eyes cast down. Peaceful. I remember Mary there in the garden.

Where do you first remember encountering Mary? When Mary, the mother of Jesus was surprised by the voice of the angel Gabriel, where was she? Do you remember? The Bible does not say. We tend to have pre-formed ideas of where she was. There are all sorts of paintings, statues, artwork of Mary. Once we have these visions in our head, it's hard to get rid of them.

Likewise, a lot of commentators talk about the primary virtue of Mary as being about her automatic, unflinching obedience. The angel talks, she responds with subservience. As if to say, she says “Yes,” Like the statue in the garden, and casts her eyes down in humility, never to look up again.

I would like to say, don't believe it. Look again at what the Bible says about Mary. As the movie Title says, there's something about Mary. What is it?

First, take into account the whole rest of the Hebrew Bible. When some divine messenger calls to someone, they always respond, “Here I am Lord.” That is not what Mary says. Mary breaks with mold. She is an innovator.

When the archangel Gabriel arrives unannounced to tell her that God had chosen her, her immediate response is not, “Here I am.” Nor does she say, “Great. Good idea.” Instead Mary says, in effect, “What?!” Followed up by words of hesitancy. “She was very perplexed... she pondered... she was afraid...” She said, “How can this be?” Only in the end, does she agree, with an implication of wholeheartedness.

But don't go there so fast. If we hear the perplexed, pondering, afraid, and the questioning, then Mary comes to us demonstrating that belief comes through some type of questioning and even doubt. Then we can see her for what she truly is. Mary is an innovator. Mary as a symbol of hope.

To talk about hope, we need to talk about despair. We need to get in touch with what is going on in the world around us. Which is not easy, as we tend to be in massive denial. The world is accustomed to despair. Personal despair, family despair, regional despair, national despair, global despair. Unprecedented crisis of global despair.

We keep believing in things that are not the source of true hope. To put it simply, what will save us?

We have Enlightenment ideas that nature is what will save us. If we are just natural enough, we will be OK. That Nature will eventually correct its own course, and the world will right itself.

With the report that came out this week on the decline of the level of oxygen in the oceans, we are seeing that human beings can destroy whole ecosystems on massive scale. Nature is not going to save us.

We all are proponents of the Enlightenment ideal of education. We come to believe that Education will save us. Enlightenment idea that if we just know enough, we will have hope. If we just have enough education, it will lead to progressively more humanization. It will lead to more democracy and civilization.

But today, the world is more educated than ever before, but are still flashpoint possibilities of conventional war, nuclear war, and genocide throughout the globe. As Martin Luther King said, if there is one thing he did not understand, it is the hardheartedness of the well-educated.

We come to believe the Enlightenment ideal of Reason. That if people were just more reasonable then we would be saved. But, as the title of Alasdair Macintyre's book puts it so well, "Whose Reason? Which Rationality?" Rationality can become an instrument of domination. Those sketches in the NY Times this week of torture used by the United States are profoundly troubling. But these torture techniques were developed by highly educated psychologists, and were implemented through very reasoned processes through multiple arms of the government. Such "reason" as a cause for profound despair.

We even still have hopes that the Enlightenment idea that, through the inevitability of progress, technology will save us. And yet Technology is clogging the oceans with garbage, and interpersonally clouding our ability to communicate on a human level.

Another enlightenment idea, if we just get rational enough we can get rid of all the religions, and peace will bloom all over the world. This perspective fails to take into account the over 100 million people killed by atheists in the past century.

We come to think all these things will save us. But we come to see they are sources of false hope. Hope has been co-opted for centuries. This is the condition, not just of the United States, but of the whole world in just about every corner. There is a global hopelessness.

In fact, our situation may best be described in the doctrine of sin. That we human beings are all sinners, every one of us. Even what is best in us, our education, our reason, our creative technology, can be part of what destroys us. Every answer we lift up as the source of hope can also lead to more despair.

The response of faith is that the only real hope we have is in the grace of God. That is where Mary comes in. That is what Mary means. The central meaning of the child in her womb is, she did not do it. A human beings did not do it. Mary is a symbol. The hope of the world is not something we achieve. It is first and foremost the mysterious, unexplained gift of God.

Our call, like Mary, is to struggle. To doubt. To question. To struggle against the threats that despair gives to us. To doubt easy answers. To question facile answers – religious or secular. And then, to open ourselves to the possibilities of God doing something radically new.

The rare Biblical talk about the virginity of Mary is not about biology. It is about theology. It is a creative, artistic, way of saying, we need to open ourselves again to recognizing that God can implant something new in us, if we wrestle with it, to the point where we can authentically say, as Mary finally said, “Here I am Lord. I am all in. Let it be. I am on your side.”

And only then, when we have actually discerned the gift of God, do we say, “Yes, Lord.” Mary is a symbol of authentic hope. She received the message, she perceived that God could do something new.

As David Hopper says in his book *Divine Transcendence and the Culture of Change*, talks about Martin Luther insights. Namely, God speaks, but God is not the only active one.” We have to listen. We have to be receptive. We have to be open and anticipating. Looking around. That is what hope looks like. Anticipation.

Michael Polanyi talks about a sort of tacit, personal knowledge. Malcom Gladwell calls it an innate capacity called “blinking. “The idea is that there is something present but not obvious in the environment. It calls to the one who is looking. It is both an act of personal knowledge and an act of faith. Anticipation.

I saw a couple of football games the year Quarterback Eric Crouch won the Heisman Trophy. I had a seat behind the goal posts. Miserable seats for most of the game. Then one play spread out right in front of me. It was a goal line stand. The other team lined up: it was a solid wall of big guys. Crouch is about 5’9”. The snap came, the wall was solid, Crouch ran full speed straight at the wall. It looked like he was going to bound off like a pinball. But then, for just a second, this little bitty hole opens and closes, and in that one second, Eric ran right through to score. He saw a space that other people did not know existed.

I realize, I am comparing the Virgin Mary to a Heisman winner. Please bear with me. You see, when Mary said, “Yes,” she opened herself up to hope; she opened herself up to an unprecedented possibility. She believed in this possibility she ran full speed, straight toward a solid wall. The wall of all those people who would doubt and criticize her for being an unwed pregnant teenager.

What’s going to happen? I can’t tell you, it’s not Christmas.

What I can tell you, is that Mary is the image of the most profound hope. Mary believed God, and said, “Let it be.” I’m all in. I’m on your team. Hand me the ball.

Mary is the embodiment of hope. The anticipation that God will do something unprecedented. Mary runs the risks a new reality. Mary dares the dangerous dream. Mary discerns the improbable presence of God. Mary listens, waits, anticipates, and commits herself to run straight into that new reality before it ever seems possible, because she discerns something is going on, and God is doing a new thing.

The future only happens because God gives us new possibilities, and because people like Mary stake their lives on it.

Let us commit to being people of genuine anticipation, willing to commit ourselves to that hope that God alone can give us something new. And then, like Mary, live in genuine anticipation that God will do something new.

Let hope be born again, in me. In us. In the world. Let hope be born in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sources: Hans Kung. Credo. Doubleday Press.