

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Rev. Dr. John Judson
December 20, 2009
“Company’s Coming...Let’s Rejoice”
Luke 1:39-55

I knew something was up. Two of the priests at the table were speaking softly with one another, looking at me and smiling. I was at a continuing education event at Oblate seminary in San Antonio. Oblate is a very old and venerable Roman Catholic seminary that offered wonderful events where their professors would take pastors through all of the texts for Advent, Lent and other seasons. This time I was attending a series on Advent and we had just finished studying the lesson that was read for us this morning, the Magnificat of Mary. Sister Sarah had lectured about the Biblical implications and then one of the other priests had begun to explain how churches could use their statues of Mary to enhance the worship experience. Needless to say while I appreciated the Biblical insights I checked out during the how to use the statue of Mary discussion, a fact which did not go unnoticed by the priests at the table. Finally at break, the two kibitzing priests ended their discussion and Father Frank turned to me, and in a loud voice said, “Hey John, we have an extra traveling Virgin we can loan you if you don’t have one.” Upon which all the priests at the table broke into gales of laughter. It gave me a new appreciation for priest humor.

That moment also gave me a new appreciation for the fact that while we Presbyterians and the Roman Catholic Church hold much basic theology in common there is at least one place where we part company...and that is Mary. For those of who are unaware, Mary holds an integral place in the heart and soul of the Roman church, from hail Mary’s which come directly out of our morning’s text, “Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.” Mary has played a central role in their theology and in their conquest of other lands. For those of us from the Southwest we know her as the Virgin of Guadalupe, because she appeared in Mexico and became the patron of that nation. We on the other hand sort of try and avoid her. We take the time to look at Mary about once a year when we drag the crèche out of storage dust her off and make sure that she is part of the manger scene. At best she plays a bit part in the salvation story...barely worth mentioning in the credits to the salvation story. So what then are we to make of these contradictory views?

I think what we are to make of them is that both the Roman and Protestant churches do a great disservice to Mary, by robbing her both of her humanity and her ability to teach us what discipleship can look like. What do I mean? The Roman church steals her humanity by making her out to be an iconic rather than historic figure. Mary’s place in the Roman church has her being born of a virgin herself (that is the Immaculate Conception), being perfect in her relationship with God, and remaining a virgin the rest of her life. Those who are her devotees have even pushed that she be named a co-redemptrix, meaning she is as responsible for salvation as was Jesus. While all of these developments can be explained by the history of the church,

they essentially remove from any sense of being a real Jewish woman living in First Century Judea. In that sense she has nothing really to say to us. But the same is true for the Protestant church. We Presbyterians have used her for our own purposes. She has become the patron saint, if we have them, for unwed mothers or the poor and homeless. She has been portrayed as this poor, illiterate, peasant who was cast out into the darkness because there was no room at the inn. Once again that does not do justice to her. She and Joseph were probably middle class, she was very knowledgeable about Jewish story and scripture and they were never homeless...they just had not made reservations. She was as we will discover in a moment a very strong and courageous young woman.

So again, what are we to make of this story? I believe what we ought to make of this story is to see that Mary was a woman who demonstrated for countless generations what it means to live out their faith with joyful bravery. The first thing we discover about Mary in this story is that she was someone who fond joy! When I say joy I do not mean happiness. Happiness and joy are not the same. Happiness is an emotion which comes and goes depending on one's immediate situation. Anyone who has ever been or has had a teenager knows how quickly happiness can come and go. Consider this, "No one will ever ask me out...then Oh he wants me to go to the dance"...low then high. Joy on the other hand is a condition of the heart. It is a state of being which is brought about by being loved by another...being loved in such a way that one's life has purpose and meaning. Mary has that. In being chosen by God to be the mother of the messiah we hear, "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." God's love for Mary and his call to her has given her not happiness but joy. She is loved and she has a purpose.

The joy she experiences then leads her to an act of uncommon bravery. I realize that few of us having read or heard the Magnificat would think that any of the language in here has anything to do with bravery. We often see it merely as some pious words which mirror more ancient Jewish stories such as that of Hannah the mother of the prophet Samuel. But the words that are spoken by Mary are revolutionary. They are a call to action by all of God's people such that they are willing to stand against the very power of Rome. Judy did such a great job in reading them, but listen again. "God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted the lowly; He has helped his servant Israel..." So who are the proud? It is Herod and his lackeys. So who are those on the thrones? It is Rome and Caesar. What Mary is verbalizing is the belief that God, through her unborn child, is going to restore the fortunes of the people of God and bring down an empire. This is bravery to the extreme because it is an act of rebellion.

When Walter Bruggeman was with us he told a story from author Elie Wiesel who had gone to the old Soviet Union to interview those he called the "Silent Jews." These were the Jews who lived underground in fear of the authorities. When he arrived none of them would speak to him because they feared being arrested. Finally just before he was to leave something amazing happened. It was Simchat Torah, the day to celebrate the law. Much to Wiesel's surprise Jews were out in the streets dancing. When he asked one of them why the change, the answer was,

“On one day I will be brave enough to celebrate being a Jew.” What Mary is calling upon us to do is to be brave every day, and not just one. Mary is calling us to have the joy filled courage to lead lives of faithfulness to God in Jesus Christ, not just in this building, not just with our friends but in every place that we live. The joy we find in being loved by God in Christ is to be exhibited at work, at school, on our sports teams, in every place we go. It is to be exhibited by our choice to speak truth to anyone who says that their claim on our lives is greater than God’s. Our temptation is to see our lives divided into two realms, one sacred the other secular. Mary speaks to us and says, “No they are one and the one belongs to God.”

The question then becomes for us what does our dance look like? What does our joy-filled dance of bravery look like on the job? What does our joy-filled dance of bravery look like at school, or with our friends, or with those we don’t even know? Here is the challenge I offer you as you move toward Christmas; ask yourselves this question, “What is one way that living with joyful bravery would cause me to act differently, and am I willing to let Mary give me the courage to do so?”