

### *Mother's Day*

Scripture Lessons: Luke 1:26-38, 47-55

There wasn't an Advent Wreath at the manger. Wreaths are a church tradition, with varied meanings and symbols from all the variety of the church's history. In different places, they mean different things, and even look different. Most Protestant churches have all purple candles. Most Catholic churches have a pink candle like our wreath. For Catholics, the pink candle is a combination of the purple and white. It can be used on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent to symbolize the closeness to Christmas, but is usually used on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent as a traditional Sunday for the ordination of new ministers.

Protestants have all kinds of explanations for themes of the week and colors of the candles. That's OK. It's like the Christmas tree we have here. Christmas trees are a secular symbol that we bring into church and put on some sacred ornaments to evangelize the tree. Advent wreaths are sacred symbols that we sometimes take into our homes for family devotions to make them more holy.

We are not sure what kind of meaning we apply to the pink candle here. Love is always soft and gentle, like pink, so maybe that is the reason. We were not sure why we have a pink candle until this last week. We went looking for another Protestant purple candle, and couldn't find just one. Being good stewards of the church's funds, we weren't going to buy another set of candles just to get one more purple one. So we have a pink candle because it came in the set.

In all churches that follow the Christian year, Advent is tied to the Old Testament prophecies, especially Isaiah. And another lesson that is read in Advent every year is the "the Magnificat." Mary's Song in Luke. In the Christian calendar, Mother's Day comes in Advent.

In this season, as in all our seasons, it makes more sense to trust the mixed up seasons of the Christian calendar and trust God's timing, than to keep bringing our calendar and our timing and our traditions that confuse God's message. Advent tells us that we cannot save ourselves, and we will be prepared for God's different coming when we are desperate enough to admit we need a Savior. Christ is coming to save us! Advent says *trust God in the waiting of not knowing*.

The candles of Hope and Peace and Love are full of trust in the not knowing. Love especially is about trusting in the not knowing. Mary shows us love in the not knowing. So, today we celebrate Mother's Day, and light the candle of love – and talk about Mary's song:

Presbyterians have largely ignored Mary, and we have accused our Catholic friends of distorting her. We might ease up on them a bit. After all, we are the tradition that takes pride in our being depraved in our perspectives and distorted in our opinions. We distort Mary, too. We paint her holding the baby Jesus in soft and sentimental portraits, and forget the job she committed herself to do. The few Presbyterians I know who have come out of Roman Catholic tradition have sometimes said that they miss Mary. We focus on the "babe in the manger" and sometimes forget how he got here.

Songs about her are usually soft lullabies. Her song is no lullaby. Mary is more complicated, even in the little we know in scripture. The main clue about her is her song.

Mary is the "young woman" who the town sees as pregnant by suspicious circumstances. She would have been shunned or stoned if it were not for the mercy of Joseph to stick by her.

If we confess that Jesus is fully human, then Mary had a lot to do with Jesus' growth in grace to become God's anointed one. We call God a father, but a mother's love for her child is as close as we can come in the flesh to knowing the grace of God, short of the one who was born to flesh by Mary his mother.

Listen for the qualities that are revealed in boldness in the lyrics of her song.

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.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants  
forever."

*Luke 1:47-55*

**Why did God choose this young, Jewish woman from low estate?  
...Because she was "lowly".**

Mary is from "*humble estate*," and humble. She was from that part of the people who are always poor and powerless. She was NOT *poor in spirit*, Just poor. Have you noticed how the Christmas story is full of poor people?

Of course her world was full of problems we cannot imagine, but Mary had a greater focus on her place in it. She is poor, but not powerless! Mary is trusting enough to do what she could, and that is why we honored her. She found her purpose in the fact that God found her, that she could be useful to God's purpose.

How many of us miss God's call right in front of us because we are living somewhere else?

How many of us think of all the things we are powerless to do, when the more important tasks and calls from God are right in front of us?

Humble is knowing that we have power to do some things, and faithfulness is committing to do what we know we can do.

The candle of Love burns because someone lit it. Mary is a lesson of love in the places of commitment to the doing. Love is always words lived in the flesh and blood of commitment. She was lowly and she loved God in the doing.

Love is an active verb – love is seen in the doing. Love is always words lived in the flesh and blood of commitment.

**Why did God choose this young, Jewish woman from low estate?**

*"let it be to me according to your word"*

**...Because she was available; she believed that God who could do great things.**

She sees what has happened to her is a gift from God, and she is glad to accept the gift.

Instead of begging for help in her fear and sense of failure about how all this had happened to her, she hears God's call. She knows God had done this, and she sees herself as "blessed."

God has done "mighty things" in the story of her people. And it is not all past tense. So God can do another mighty thing with a lowly girl.

How many of us think all the great things God has done are already done?

How many of us are deaf to God's call because we think God has stopped speaking and gone somewhere else? Mary is an example to us – not because she was young and scared – but because she was scared and faithful.

How many of us are old enough to be grown-ups with God, but we have stopped thinking about being available to the God who can do great things?

How many of us sit in a sanctuary and think our time of great things is past, and God is doing great things in other places?

How hard is it for us simply to ask God to do as God pleases, and then we say we will do the work of love that God wills.

"Love" is a word we use so many different ways that we are not sure it has any meaning at all. We "love" ice cream. We "love" some football team. We love whatever.

We say, "I love you." NOT "I loved you." Even when we say "I will love you," we are saying "I am loving you in each moment, now to forever – for all my present tenses." Love really has no past tense. Love is always present tense.

Mary was present tense with God. "Let it be to me according to your word." Saying we love God means we are available to do whatever God wants us to do in the here and now – present tense.

### **Why did God choose this young, Jewish woman from low estate?**

*"The Mighty One has done great things."*

**...Because she could hear that her child was destined for divine purposes.**

Mary sings of the power of the Mighty One to work in strange events – to turn things upside down, or right side up.

God has scattered the proud and strengthened the humble.

God has brought down the powerful and raise up the lowly.

God has sent the rich away empty and filled the hungry with good things.

Let's be honest. If some angel with wings and glowing light appeared and spoke the command, we would obey. We certainly would do God's will for an angel. Sometimes we want the certainty before we will act.

But NT word *angelos* just means "messenger." It does not mean wings and glowing light. Some stranger than stranger knocks on Mary's door and says "I'm Gabriel. Don't be afraid. You are pregnant with the Messiah." What would you do some guy knocked on your door and said he had a message from God? Call 911?

How many of us would listen to a stranger with an even stranger message?

How many of us would give a poor, pregnant teenager a second look?

How hard is it for us to say the Mighty One can do great things?

How hard is it for us to see God at work in the "lowly," the ordinary people and events around us?

How many of us are open to new and different ways of seeing the world, asking how church needs to be done, looking for a surprising way that God will change our ways?

As followers, as parents, as people who love other people and sometimes don't know how to love, as people who sometimes love the wrong way and have to try a new way to love – Mary, the Mother of God, can teach us God's love. Look how Mary never let go when her child went directions that were strange to her. She stayed with him, even when she wondered if he had heard what she had heard. She thought he was the Anointed One to rescue captive Israel. He saw his Anointing differently – to be a savior of all God's people.

Love is not some sweet sentiment of pink candles and gentle words and valentine candy and romantic dinners. Love is always a will to live for the best of the other. It is what God does with us – putting up with us, holding us, forgiving us, always willing the best in us. So God's love among us is the willingness to let the other person hear God's call and follow the path God chooses, even when a new generation may look and think and act differently than I have.

Renée and I were older than Mary when our first child was born. We did not have an angel knock on the door, so we were not so afraid as Mary might have been. We knew our little girl would lead us to places beyond our planning or imagining. But we knew our new little girl belonged to God before we ever took her to a temple for a dedication.

We had a dedication and celebration with closest friends and adopted family at home. Our parents were far away and working. But my father called back to say he had packed the car and was on the way. He just wanted to be here.

He stayed a few days, and finally admitted he just had to go. He was holding Jenna, then he put her back in my arms and said, "Son, I don't have any great advice about parenting. You and your sisters turned out better than your mother and I could have dreamed. I think the secret to parenting is to remember that God does the raising if you don't get in the way."

Maybe he had heard Mary's song somewhere along the way: The Mighty One does the great things.

God has dreams for our children – dreams for all people who are all God's children – that are greater than ours; God has hopes for them that are more true to their creating all our hopes.

If we are like Mary – doing what we can, available to the new direction of a Savior's leading, and trusting that we are all destined to divine purpose – then we can love the way she loved, and the way God wants us to love.

Love is powerful precisely because we do not know where love will lead us.

Love is miraculous precisely because we commit to a "whatever" for the best for someone who is worth more than we have and are. And we know Love works, because we look back and say with hearts full of love "It is all God's doing."

Today, we look back and honor Mary, young woman of low estate who God trusted with the Anointed One. We call her the Mother of God, because we confess that in the incarnation Jesus got his full humanity from her, and his full faithfulness by her leading. She was full of grace, and so her son was full of grace and truth. The Lord was with her, and now the Lord is "God with us" in the flesh. She sang with joy, because God had done great things for her. And we sing with joy when we are available to the great things of God after her example. So even we Presbyterians can say old words with new re-forming meaning,

Hail Mary, Mother of God,  
Full of grace, the Lord is with you.  
Blessed are you among women.  
And blessed is the fruit of your womb."