

Heavenly Reversals

December 20, 2015

Psalm 80:1-7; Luke 1:39-57

Protestant Christians don't know what to do with Mary. We accept that she was the very first one to believe that God was sending the Messiah. We accept that she stood at the foot of the Cross when Jesus died and was commended into John's care. In Ephesus in present-day Turkey there is a ruin named Mary's house. We can even accept that she may have lived her last days in that large city many miles from Nazareth. But beyond that, we don't get what most would call Mariology.

And there's good reason. The Reformers thought veneration of Mary had gone too far. Apart from the whole idea of the Immaculate Conception of Mary which was celebrated in parts of the church on December 8th, we wonder if those who make so much of Mary aren't compensating for how exclusively male both God and the clergy are in that part of the Church.

At our cabin in Sonoma County there are two churches within walking distance—a Roman Catholic and a fundamentalist Christian Church. We've struck up friendships with both a former priest and some of the members of the Roman Catholic Church, so we attend there when in the neighborhood. One year I went to mass—on Mother's Day. It was all about Mary. I thought I was going there to remember the family, or how thankful I am for my own mother, or just to worship. But it was clear that those who wrote and led the liturgy had another agenda.

This ambivalence about Mary must be admitted before we hear this story of Elizabeth encountering Mary in Elizabeth's home and then the song that Mary breaks out after she is blessed by Elizabeth.

Mary is breaking out in song for dramatic literary effect as Miriam, Moses' sister, did after "the horse and the rider were thrown into the [Red] sea" and Hannah did after found out she was pregnant. Hannah's song is much like Mary's.

Hannah's is more of a national song of deliverance where Mary gets both personal and, dare I say it(?), offensive.

The story is told in, I believe, South Africa during the apartheid era of a black preacher reading Mary's song to a bunch of white people. The black preacher did not identify either that it was from the Bible or whose words they were. The black preacher asked what the white people thought of what they had just heard. One man said, "It sounds like a bunch of Marxist claptrap to us." Part of the Mary's song goes, "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."

It's the rich being sent away empty that shimmered for me this past Thursday morning in Sunrise Morning Prayer. I don't want to see class warfare in our land any more than you do. Don't the rich pay far more in taxes, even with their good accountants? Don't the rich often deserve their wealth because they've found a more efficient way or a need in our society that nobody thought of before? Isn't the whole capitalistic system a great way to reward initiative and the best way to generate if not to distribute wealth?

Two things must be said. First, the Bible sees poverty and riches in a far more spirit-oriented way than our culture does. Luke's Jesus says "blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Matthew's Jesus says "blessed are the poor *in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew expands poverty to mean what's going on in your heart. You can have all the wealth of Bill Gates and Warren Buffet combined and be perfectly miserable in your spirit. To broaden the analogy, Redlands has lost almost no wealth because of the San Bernardino massacre, but our spirit has been rocked if not impoverished by the acts of two of our residents.

The second thing is Mary sees a real reversal because of the baby that's growing within her. I've called it a heavenly reversal because neither Mary nor Elizabeth had thought this up. That's the real meaning of the Virgin Birth. This baby was from heaven, as the Gospel According to John says, "born, not of blood or the will

of the flesh or the will of a male, but of God.” We must look at all of the reversals Mary sees to understand what a big deal she thinks this baby will be.

Most of us are not Jewish by birth or choice. We don’t think much about the Messiah. We’ve heard of *christening* which comes from the same root word as Messiah, the Anointed One. A Christening is some Christians’ word for Baptism when it’s specifically given to an infant. It’s close to our word for the Messiah-Christ. And most of us know the name Christ is just Greek for the Anointed One. In Hebrew it’s the Messiah. But we’ve lost the sense of the revolution that the Messiah is supposed to bring.

According to Mary, the Messiah brings world peace. The Messiah brings the end of hunger. The Messiah brings equality both between nations and within nations. I hope I’m not being too loyal to my French heritage to say that the Messiah was to bring in the ideal of *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*: equality, liberty and fraternity, or companionship. If you read Mary’s song with that ideal in your mind you see that what she’s singing about is a whole new world.

We’ve largely lost that consciousness. We’ve given up. It’s been 2000 years since Mary first sang that song and the massacres still tell us there is very little peace. One in seven people in this world are even hungry or malnourished. I suspect the world spends far more on arms than it does on education, maternal health or clean water systems combined. Where’s the peace, where’s the hunger relief, where’s the equality?

This past week I went to the Redlands City Council at the suggestions of our representative to the House of Representatives, Pete Aguilar. He told me there were some angry people who would be there, and I might want to say something. He was right about the first part—the anger, but as a resident of San Bernardino I’m not sure I even have the right to address the city council in the public comment period.

In the public comment period I heard that people were angry at our government for not protecting us in San Bernardino. They were angry at Muslims for being so consistently violent, in their view. They were angry at the mayor who spoke of

the evil of both murder *and* prejudice. I know that 3 minutes in front of a microphone to say anything you want, to a part of our government, has a power that writing your representative, senator or President does not. But it is clear that at least some residents of Redlands see no evidence of the difference that the coming of the Anointed One has in their world.

What Mary says is that the seed has been sown. That, as we'll sing in a few minutes, "the world is about to turn." We've been waiting for a long time for the new world. We'll be waiting some more even as we say "come, Lord Jesus." A dear Christian who has taught me more than most anyone else says Mary's song announces a crisis in the Greek sense of the word, and a crisis is a "permanent new state of living where God's reign is the only power to be reckoned with." I know we pray weekly if not daily "thy kingdom come." But what Mary is singing about is that it's already here. The rich will be sent away empty when the baby in her womb is born.

I know this "permanent new state of living" is a hard truth to swallow much less live. Because, as we've learned recently, there can be a vast chasm between what you say you believe and what you do. I'm learning this in regards to Muslims.

One hunger I am hearing expressed as a result of the massacre is to find out what Muslims actually believe. Here's a caution: there's a world of difference between a faith or religion's teachings and people's practice of it. Imagine if you came from outer space and had no prior knowledge of Christianity. And you started at the top of Cajon and spent an hour each with 30 Christians from Bethany Reformed, Trinity Episcopal, Mission Church, Holy Name of Jesus, and finished at this church. And then you got to spend an hour around the dinner table with each of their longest time member. What would that person from outer space say Christianity is and does?

There is always the folk expression of a religion and then there are its teachings as expressed in creeds like the Apostle's and Nicene Creed. As a former professor of mine who was a Mennonite missionary to India said, "I had to teach the South Asians their Hinduism before I could convert them from it to Christianity." They

were folk Hindus, not textbook Hindus. We are in a similar place with Islam today.

Here's what Mary teaches us. Mary not only teaches us what to sing about—God's reversal, but how to sing. She does it with great obedience. She accepts the word that has been given her by both the angel and Elizabeth. Obedience has been suspect because it usually connotes submission. But the root word for obedience is the same word from which we get the word for hearing and listening. Obedience is to listen in a holy way--to learn to block other things out and make a good God's will your chief delight. It takes a lifetime, a loving, honest community and some good friends to listen. And the weak and naturally narcissistic human condition makes holy listening one of the most difficult tasks on earth. But Mary tells us it's worth the try. A new world breaks forth when we do.

I quoted Henri Nouwen last week who wrote that we must choose joy every day. The task this week prior to Christmas Eve is to choose to obey every day—to listen to God with all your might, because the world is about to turn.