

Mary's Song of Defiant Courage

Luke 1:26-38 & 46-55

Preached By Rev Tamara Torres McGovern 11.28.2021

I have a friend who is a nurse midwife at Planned Parenthood. This means that she walks with women (and other people with uteruses) through a wide variety of reproductive journeys. Sometimes she sees people who have gotten pregnant as soon as they started intentionally trying, and they are thrilled to be having a baby! But... that scenario is relatively rare. More often my friend works with those who are experiencing complications associated with their fertility. Some of these folks receive a positive pregnancy test when being a mother is the LAST thing that they can imagine doing. Others are 2,3,4, 5, 12 miscarriages into their journey toward parenthood—and each loss devastating. Some of the women my friend sees have been victims of sexual abuse or violence that has impacted their fertility—and they feel re-victimized by what has been stolen. Others have medical conditions that make future fertility complicated or unlikely. Some of the women she sees have children who are nearly grown when they have an “oops” pregnancy years after they thought their fertility window had closed. And still others have given birth to a long-awaited child, only to find that they are struggling to bond, or that postpartum depression has set in. (Pause)

As many of YOU— as many of US— intimately know, these journeys are being lived out around us every day... individuals, couples and families quietly grieving losses that are hard to talk about in public, OR making tough decisions that carry social stigma but are the right choice for their family at that time. I have a friend who quietly grieves the would-be-birthdays of every child she has lost. I know others whose lives revolve around ovulation kits, hormone shots, and endless cycles of hope and disappointment as they continue to try. There are those among

us who have become parents through adoption, and others who are raising grand-kids or nieces and nephews because their biological parents were unwilling or unable.... I ALSO know folks who would tell you, confidentially, that they love their children, but that they are not sure being a parent was the right choice for them and that they might have chosen differently if they had it to do over. The fertility stories of the people around us are as numerous and diverse as the folks in this room.

(Pause)

So, back to my friend the midwife, one of the things that is so striking to me about HER story, is that she was at this job when she herself was struggling to conceive. For four years, she and her partner tried to get pregnant. Their desire to have a child was so great that they went into tens of thousands of dollars of debt attempting every fertility treatment available. Meanwhile, every day she went to work and held space for individuals and families whose authentic journeys were the inverse to her own. In her position, I imagine I would have been **OUTRAGED** at God— what justice is there in one person wanting nothing more than to be a mother, and another person wanting nothing more than to be freed of that burden? My friend's ability to see the sacredness in each person's journey, rather than imposing her own narrative onto others, was awe inspiring to me. And so today, in honor of the good work my friend and others at Planned Parenthood are doing, especially in the current climate which is increasingly hostile toward reproductive choice, AND in honor of the many fertility stories that are here are in this room, I want to invite us to look at Mary again, though new eyes.

When it comes to fertility, the Bible itself, can be **REALLY** triggering. In the Ancient Near East, the chief value of a woman was, first, her chastity, and then after marriage, her fertility. Throughout the Bible we are given stories in which God blesses someone who is experiencing infertility by making them pregnant: Rachel, Hannah, Sarah, Elizabeth... in fact, one article I read cited over 300 female charac-

ters in the Bible who are infertile until God “blesses them with a child.” Women’s infertility is used as a literary trope— a way of propelling the story forward and highlighting God’s goodness: woman is infertile, woman is pious and devout and prays for years for a child, God gives woman a child, child is extra special because they were a gift from God as a result of a super-prayerful mom. So, what message does this send to woman who can’t get pregnant despite years of hoping and praying— OR what does it say about women who don’t want to become mothers— because they would like to give birth to something else in their lives? If God blesses the faithful with fertility, does child-less-ness suggest that one is NOT favored by God?

In the bible, women’s fertility is their central purpose— and, in almost every instance, when their fertility journey is highlighted it is to bring the reader’s attention to a character (the MALE character) who is about to be born. Which brings us to our story today—one of the most unusual fertility journeys in the bible. The annunciation story of the angel visiting Mary to announce her pregnancy, mirrors a story that comes just before it, when the same angel visited Zechariah and told him that his wife Elizabeth, despite her late age, would soon conceive a child. That child, grows up to be John the Baptist... the outspoken rabble-rouser who paves the way for Jesus’ ministry and message.

With that as foreshadowing, by the time the angel shows up in our passage for today, the listener can guess where the story is going: an unexpected pregnancy heralding the arrival of someone who will transform the faith. But this time, the miracle of the conception is NOT that the mother-to-be is old, or that she is barren, but that she is unwed and, at the time of the angel’s visit, a virgin. Which IS, admittedly, a pretty good plot twist. Especially in the Ancient Near East when women’s central value is their virginity and motherhood, BUT these things usually don’t happen at the same time! That impossibility signals to the readers that some-

thing BIG is about to happen. But while it makes for a good set-up, I don't actually think that Mary's virginity is what makes the story so powerful.

And yet, if you were to go downtown and ask people what they know about Mary, I would put money on the fact that her virginity is the first, and maybe the ONLY thing they would come up with. She is the "perfect woman" both a Virgin and a Mother, like a cheesecake made entirely of celery, all of the purity and none of the sin. AND, when that is what you highlight about her, no other woman can ever emulate her. But for most people, that is where her character stops— which I think is a real disservice, not only to Mary, but to what has come to mean to the rest of us.

Mary was a young teenage girl, maybe 12, maybe 15... but definitely quite young. She lived in Galilee, which was not an important city, but rather a rural border town— a place we might describe as the "middle of nowhere." She was betrothed, but not yet married to, an older respectable man who, in essence OWNED her. In these circumstances she found herself pregnant in a culture in which **coercive control of female sexuality was a common measure of masculine honor**. That she was pregnant with a child without having consummated that marriage to Joseph— would have been an affront to his honor, and grounds for punishment— most likely, her death by stoning. Or at least exile: being kicked out of her family, discarded and left to beg for a living. And what could she REALLY tell her husband, "Look, I know you have a little deal with my dad, and that I am going to be your wife— and that you negotiated that deal based upon my virginity... which I still am... but here's the thing, an angel visited me and, it turns out, I'm a little, teeny-tiny bit pregnant..." I know we are used to this story, but try, if you can, to imagine being that young teenage girl. Try to imagine how terrified she must have been when she received this news. Her entire value was linked to her virginity and

fertility, and she had control over NEITHER of those things, and she has just found out that she is pregnant— and not by Joseph.

The angel has come bearing news that could, literally, end her life. She must have been TERRIFIED. And with that in mind, now listen again to what she says:

“My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s servants. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—and holy is God’s name.”

Hmmm... this is not, I imagine, how I would have responded if I were I in Mary’s shoes.

Mary’s response is known as the *Magnificat* deriving from the Latin translation of this passage, which says: "Magnificat anima mea Dominum," which means "my soul magnifies the Lord." It is the longest direct quote from any woman in the New Testament— and one of the most powerful passages in the bible.

Carolyn Sharp, Episcopal Priest and professor of Hebrew Scriptures at Yale University writes this about it:

Mary’s Magnificat is a powerful poem that holds together the grittiness of life on the margins and the resilient hope of those who trust in God. I don’t envision Mary as the radiant woman peacefully composing the Magnificat, but as a girl who sings defiantly to her God through her tears, fists clenched against an unknown future. Mary’s courageous song of praise is a radical resource for those seeking to honor the holy amid the suffering and conflicts of real life...”

So, I guess for me, the miracle of her story, is NOT that Mary was an the impossible virgin mother. The miracle is that this girl whose life hung in the balance, a girl who was reared in a patriarchal culture that saw her as property, a girl who for all intents and purposes should have been voiceless; the miracle is that SHE believed that she was BLESSED by God. That is audacious! That is incredi-

ble! I can only speak for myself, but I have grown up in a much more empowered context, and yet I still struggle some days to feel blessed. (pause)

AND then, the NEXT miracle is that her betrothed, Joseph, who was a respected man and had his reputation on the line, chose, against all odds, to **believe** her... to take her voice seriously and **listen** to what she has to say about her fertility journey AND her awareness that she is blessed. (pause) Just think about it, we are in a much more progressive culture than theirs, and we still have a hard time supporting and trusting women's complicated fertility journeys... so much so that the Supreme Court is examining Roe vs Wade. So much so that almost 6 years ago to the day, someone went into a Planned Parenthood, here in Colorado, and killed people for the fertility choices they had made together with their doctors. (pause)

And THEN, the next miracle is that Mary and Joseph decided to let go of their preconceptions about what parenthood SHOULD look like, to set fear aside and trust what was unfolding. But here's the thing, trusting what is unfolding does not mean that one will be shielded from pain— no, Joseph and Mary raised a willful child, one who defied them at every turn and got himself into one scrape after another, and chose a dangerous path. And eventually, they had to go through the thing that every parent most fears, the violent death of their precious child, whom they loved more than anything in the world. (pause)

This story is, of course, what the journey of parenthood— really, the journey of LIFE, is all about. It is about journeys that don't go as planned, children who grow up to be different than you expected. It's about living in a world that can be unkind, and trusting that you can be blessed and beloved by God throughout the whole complicated mess of your life. The story of Mary is not really about her being a miraculous virgin— that is just a literary trope to move the action forward. It is about the courage of a young, scared woman. It is about the trust and support of her partner, Joseph. It is about life unfolding in unexpected ways and the ability to

still witness God in the midst of the mess. It is about wild improbability of believing that, no matter your social location or the way other people may see you, that you are worthy of being blessed by God. Yes YOU are worthy of being BLESSED by God. Let me say it one more time: YOU are worthy of being blessed by God.

And so today, I have covered the altar in candles, and I want to invite you to do something just a-little-bit Catholic. I want to invite you to come forward and light a candle for Mary. But not just the Mary of scripture—rather I want to invite you to come forward and light a candle for a Mary in your life. Perhaps you light the candle to honor the complicated fertility journey that you, or someone you love, has traveled through or is traveling right now. OR, perhaps you want to light a candle to honor the trust and support that someone has showed you in your life, their choice to BELIEVE you and support your truth. OR, maybe you want to come forward and light a candle for courage—praying to Mary for strength as you face something difficult in your life. OR, maybe you want to come forward and light a candle to affirm that you are blessed—in all of your imperfectness—by a God who does not only love the powerful, or the perfect, but a God who sees YOU as worthy of a blessing—just as you are. (pause) So in just a moment, please come forward as you feel called, to light a candle that Mary’s strength might bless whatever you need blessed in your life.

In closing, I would ask you to please pray with me:

Dear ones, hear the good news. You are favored!

For God is here and where she is is holy.

You have been chosen among all people to give birth to something new.

For God is here and where she is, is holy.

What you thought was sure death, has become life.

For God is here and where she is is holy.

Feel inside, and feel the Spirit growing new life in your heart.

For God is here and where she is is holy.

Together, let us ignite lights of hope, of courage, of strength, of resilience, of trust, of love. Lights that no darkness can hide.

For God is here and where she is is holy.