

Advent 3 Sermon  
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This year, maybe for the first time ever, I read this text and thought--Where was Mary's mother? I mean really. I am the mom of teenagers and I so hope that they would tell me something like this! Knowing the historical information we have about Mary--that she was young, she would have been shamed for being pregnant before she was married even if she was engaged, that her first reaction was to say Yes God, got it and then immediately run away to her cousin for safety and processing and help. So, as a mom who wants her children to never be afraid of telling her anything and as a pastor who loves the teenagers and young adults and children in our congregation and community in the depths of my soul, where was her Mom, her Dad, her sister, her rabbi, her mentor, her best friend??

And yet, it seems also clear that Mary had an encounter with God that left her in a place of vulnerability and strength at the same time. Mary would have been acutely aware of her situation, the shunning that could and would be cast upon her by her community and yet she had the groundedness, the strength, the deep seeded joy of the spirit so richly rooted in her that she was able to not only praise God but sing a song of grace and defiance at the same time--wherever her mother was, this is one of the moments of awe and pride and seeing God work in those place most intimate and close and realize it also has far reaching and global implications, can truly beyond comprehension.

Even to a parent, who would know the ins and outs of their child's moods and weaknesses, passions and strengths, this is a moment when all there is to do is stand back and get out of God's way. I have experienced on, of course, a smaller scale, these kinds of moments as a mother-- the first time I heard my daughter speak about her passion for food justice in the world and the time my son was the one to stand with strength and compassion for a classmate being persecuted come to mind. These are times when the background presence of a parent and the lessons and years of nurturing come to play out in their own way through the Holy Spirit and we get to watch.

There is so much floating out there in our culture and from the blending of many faith traditions about Mary. She is almost always there by the manger, kneeling over her baby or holding him in her arms. She is depicted at the birth as quiet and sweet and has this element of passive sacred holiness surround her. And she is almost always dressed in blue--which it turns out comes from a passage in the Old Testament from Numbers--

*Speak to the people of Israel, and bid them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put upon the tassel of each corner a cord of blue; and it shall be to you a tassel to look upon and remember all the commandments of the Lord, to do*

*them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to go after wantonly. (Numbers 15:38-39)*

So for the people of Israel, Mary's people, this color brings to mind someone who follows God's will over and above what may be the desire or even the cultural norm for themselves. Blue means following God, bending to the commandments and being grounded in the law and able to live into them in circumstances that come in life. We are surrounded by blue in the sanctuary, the color of advent because the people of God aren't just the people of Israel anymore... they include you. The liturgical colors are here too to remind us of the words of God, the commands that we live into and the promise of that word dwelling among us.

The portrayal of Mary is so often one that glosses over the reality of her life, her circumstance, and who she was. We have turned this following of the law and the color blue and the portraits of Mary in to quiet, submissive, backdrops to the story of God made flesh, Immanuel, with us. And yet in the spaces of this story that are not told, there must have been real action-tears and fear and confusion, not to mention a worried mother, all mixed up with the trust, the commitment and love for God that at the same time was a radical defiance of the world, the norms, the shame and the culture around her. And Mary does follow the law to love God with all her heart and mind and soul, not just to the letter of the scribes, but she goes beyond into the heart of what that means. As many teens I know, she uses her voice and her response of praise and rebellion against the powers of the world comes through in her song:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

Mary had a voice and life to use for God and when the community told her this was something to feel ashamed of, when she was told that she was outside of God's righteousness, she does not allow herself to be defined as anything other than beloved and blessed. Mary responded to the request, the blessing, the words of the angel with a sense of self that knew the reality but also experienced the promise. Here she is knowing to the core that God's spirit, God's presence, God's promise will come into the very lowest place where she dwells. God is here for her and more than that, God is here for all those who are on the outside.

*<sup>50</sup>His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

Mary declares that God is not only the God of the righteous, but God of those who are seen as cursed, outcast, shamed by the world in which they live and that God's mercy will overcome the power, the pain, the oppression, the injustice of the world in which Mary lives and in which we live as well.

<sup>54</sup>*He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,* <sup>55</sup>*according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”*

Mary knows the promise, the word, the gift of God. She seems to know this beyond the knowing of her head and into the knowing of her heart. The world would say, there is no precedence for her to believe that the angel is real, that the promise is real, that God would choose her over a princess or a king. But Mary remembers the story of Abraham, she knows God uses those no one expects like unmarried, young, pregnant girl and remembers who the people of God are called to be. remembers who she is to the core--one who is beloved, one who is called child of God.

Mary sees the bigger picture. That this promise of a child goes well beyond her and her life and her needs. Mary holds this bigger picture throughout her life with Jesus, holds it all the way to the end where she stands as witness at the cross, from the beginning to the end, Mary holds not just the literal baby hand of God in Jesus, but the whole heart and life of God poured out for the world.

So perhaps Mary's mother was watching, listening, learning, and experiencing God in a new way at the same time as her daughter. This is a gift of advent and Christmas. That we have this story of the strength and the weakness of a young girl all mixed into one and that this young woman not only stands a rebel in her own time, declaring that God loves the poor, the outcast, the shamed and the weak. But she stands here with us today as well, amongst the witnesses of the beginning and the end.

The beginning of the story of God is one that casts out shame and fear. Shame is real in our lives. It can destroy our minds and our hearts and our very beings. God comes, Immanuel, with us--to bring love, yes. declare a new story, yes. To give the world hope, light, and mercy, yes. And in all that, in all these things, says do not be afraid because whatever shame you carry or think you carry, whatever hold evil or expectation or grief or fear have on you--there is more. There is light. There is promise. There is babies leaping in wombs, There is children seeing beyond what is real, There is teenagers standing up with passion and strength, There is mothers and fathers and grandmas and grandpas and aunts and uncles and friends and neighbors coming into the spaces of the story of the world and into the story of your life and heart as witnesses to the promise of this love, this light, this mercy that casts out all shame-no matter what, all darkness and sin--no matter what. Do not be afraid for these things cannot hold you because the God who is and was and is to come holds you first and holds you fast.