



CATHEDRAL *of the* INCARNATION

Mary's Revolutionary Song: Sermon on Luke 1.39-80

The Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 23rd, 2018

The Very Rev. Michael Sniffen, Dean

Last week, Mother Morgan spoke to us from Holy Scripture and personal experience about the gift of Stewardship - about the privilege of caring for God's community and God's world, and about the generosity of God that overflows into - and out of - our lives.

Mother Morgan preached about the challenge, the joy, and the responsibility of supporting God's purposes in the world. Everything she said resonated with me - especially her personal stories. The sermon caused me to well up with gratitude. Gratitude, and if I'm honest to the point of vulnerability, a certain feeling of insufficiency. Not regarding the message itself, but rather my ability to commit fully to God's purposes in the world.

I'm a priest, after all. I'm expected to be "all in" for Jesus. And that's fair. I took vows binding myself to service in word and sacrament. This I take very seriously. I tithe my income. I praise the Lord. I celebrate the mysteries. I love and serve my neighbors. I'm exceedingly humble...but how far am I really willing to go to support God's purposes in the world? After all, most religious leaders don't fare so well in the Gospels.

What sort of a Steward am I? Am I willing to go all the way? Would I join Mary and Elizabeth if called?

In today's Gospel they really show their stripes. Both were somewhat reluctant converts to God's movement, but when the chips are down, they are all in. They join themselves irrevocably to God's conspiracy in the world. They become mothers to two spiritual revolutionaries instituting a new world order called the Kingdom of God. That's some serious Stewardship. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord!

Maybe you think I'm overselling their commitment, but it's true. There isn't an ounce of hesitation in the Magnificat. It is a full out, no holds barred, manifesto of the Christian faith:

God is working, in secret - with outcasts and sinners - to save all those in need and to bring corruption and evil to their knees.

“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 imagination 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.”

Mary’s song of praise, rich with prophetic imagery, sets the tone for her son’s ministry like no other passage in scripture. Originally, what we know as the Magnificat was likely an independent canticle inspired by many different verses from several books of Hebrew Scripture. Indeed, there are multilayered scriptural echoes in every line of the Magnificat. The author of Luke likely included this song in the Gospel in order to provide a thematic prelude to the appearance of Jesus.

Not only will Mary give birth to a savior, she will give birth to a movement. The mother of God also becomes the Godmother of the Christian conspiracy.

I don’t use the word conspiracy lightly. It’s just the right word for the beginning of the Jesus movement. Conspiracy comes from the Latin *conspirare* meaning, "to agree, to unite in a plot" literally "to breathe together.”

Mary and Elizabeth conspire with God to bring something entirely novel to birth in the world. A movement of sacrificial love led by God’s own son and governed by God’s own precepts. This movement will eventually transcend even the powers of death. It will define the word unstoppable and it will travel, as they said in those days, “to the ends of the earth.”

Mary’s powerful words, emblazoned on our own cathedral windows, sung by choirs across time and across the world - are perhaps the most impactful words of subversion in the Christian Canon.

Sister Elizabeth Johnson says, “The Magnificat is a revolutionary song of salvation whose economic, political, and social dimensions cannot be blunted. People in need in every society hear a blessing in this canticle. The battered woman, the single parent without resources, those without food on the table or without even a table, the homeless family, the young abandoned to their own devices, the old who are discarded: all are encompassed in the hope Mary proclaims.”

Over the ages, these words have terrified those who sought to dominate the lives of others. The Magnificat was banned being sung or read in India under British rule.

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached about the Magnificat in Advent 1933 before being executed by the Nazis. He said,

“The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings....This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.”

In the 1980's, the Magnificat was banned in Guatemala.

The military regime in Argentina outlawed any public display of the Magnificat after the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo —whose children disappeared during the Dirty War of the late 1970's - placed the Magnificat's words on posters in the capital plaza.

In Advent we are invited to be stewards of Mary's song today.

How will we sing the Magnificat not only in God's glorious cathedral here, but in our lives?

How will our souls magnify God and God's work?

Are we willing to join Mary and Elizabeth in God's conspiracy in the world?

It is easy to feel insufficient when God invites us to join her in changing the world. The good news is this: We are never asked to do this work alone. We do it together, with lots of support - with plenty of help and with the love and grace of God to guide us.

Grace abounds in the work of helping God lift the least and the lost in Christ's name. God is working things out, with our help, really. Not the other way around. God's grace is sufficient for us and what we are able to do together, faithfully, is enough.

‘God is working his purpose out,
as year succeeds to year,
God is working his purpose out,
and the time is drawing near;

nearer and nearer draws the time,
the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea.
When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea.'

God comes in humble glory disguised as one of us. And he comes soon.