

Mary's glad song

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 20, 2009.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior...He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. Luke 1: 47, 52

When she was in third grade, my daughter came home from school one day to tell us that a friend told her that our church doesn't believe in the "blessed mother." I explained that we do believe in Mary, though perhaps not in the same way. Having been brought up in a more protestant era of the Episcopal Church, I recall that there wasn't much emphasis on Mary other than that she was the mother of Jesus. Whether you refer to her as the Blessed Virgin, the blessed mother, the mother of God, the Queen of heaven, or just Mary the mother of Jesus, she is no less important to our faith. As more and more mysterious doctrines have accumulated around the person of Mary, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate fact from fiction. A good place to begin is what we read in the Bible about this most honored person in all human history.

As a young unmarried woman, Mary is understandably bewildered when learning that she will conceive a son who will be called Jesus. She is both mystified and perplexed by this news that she is chosen to be the means by which God enters human history. In her visit to the home of her kinswoman, Elizabeth, Mary is told that she is "Blessed among women." While this young maiden must have been very bewildered and afraid, she willingly accepts what God wants for her in giving birth to the Christ child of God. We can imagine her bewilderment in being singled out for this great honor and what she must have thought when those of high and low estate arrive at the crude stable to see her newborn child.

Because she was chosen to bear the source of our salvation, Mary has a rightful place of honor in our faith. After she gives birth to the Christ child they are forced to flee to Egypt to escape the persecution before they can return to their home in Nazareth. As he grows strong in spirit, Mary believes her son is special as any mother would, yet she doesn't completely comprehend his full nature. She brings him up to observe all the ritual traditions of the Jewish faith, beginning with bringing him to the temple on the eighth day after his birth to be circumcised and named. On the fortieth day after his birth, the young mother undergoes the rites of purification and presents her child to the priest to be dedicated to God.

We catch only a glimpse of Jesus' early years when he leaves the company of his family to go into the synagogue to teach the elders. Upon finding him, his anxious parents don't understand what business their young son has with those learned men. Jesus continues to work in the carpenter's shop until the age of thirty when he begins his active ministry. One of my favorite vignettes of the early years of his ministry shows him attending a wedding celebration with his mother in the town of Cana in Galilee. When the wine runs out, threatening to spoil the festivities, Mary confidently assures everyone that her son will take care of the situation. Having been volunteered by my own mother many times to do innumerable things for other people, I can identify with his exasperated response as he saves an embarrassing situation.

As the years go on, we see Mary with the other women accompanying Jesus during his itinerant ministry. We see her standing sorrowfully by the cross, keeping watch over her dying son as he entrusts her to the care of his friend John. Finally, we see her with the other disciples in the upper room at the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. These are scenes of a very simple

and very human mother before later devotion attached so many other claims and myths about her not found in scripture.

At the centerpiece of all this is Mary's glad song, the *Magnificat*, expressing her joy in following God's will:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.

He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

He has done great things for me and holy is his name.

He has shown the strength of his arm...

and scattered those who think of themselves with pride.

This hymn of praise to God is a revolution in the society of people in which divisive social distinctions of race, class, and position are no longer. Young and old, male and female, management and labor, educated and uneducated, are all invited to sit at the banquet of God.

He has brought down the powerful... and lifted up the lowly. The birth of Christ signaled a revolution in the way people are governed, a revolution in which power, prestige and privilege are no longer important. Those who are in power have the responsibility to share it with those who have none.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. The Christ event is an economic revolution in which both rich and poor, middle class and under class have the same opportunities. In Christ, all are entitled to the same bread and the same cup. The able can show the way for the less able to have the opportunities for a better life.

When God entered the human drama through the birth of Christ, it was the turning point in history. The miracle of Christ's birth makes way for our spiritual rebirth in learning to trust in what God wants for us. Because of what she went through, Mary stands as an example of trusting in God's purposes. More than being passive, Mary takes the situation in hand and accepts the role God gives her because she knows that she is a part of what God is accomplishing. Her example awakens in us that essence of faith that replaces cynicism with trust, skepticism with confidence and turns defeat into victory.

God brings down the oppressor and lifts up the lowly, countering the way of greed and selfishness. This means that the first will be last and the last will be first. It means those who only live for themselves will lose meaning in the lives and those who put aside self-concern will find real meaning and purpose in serving others. The world may appeal to our base desires but faith appeals to our better nature.

In the secular culture in which we live, much of the world sees faith as irrelevant and treats the Sabbath as any other day of the week. As Christians, we live in a world that has a different agenda. We look to Christ Jesus who enables us to move through the darkness of unknowns into the light of understanding of what God wants for us.