Sermon on Advent 4 2021

Was Mary a bit crazy? Serious question actually! I take as my point of reference the Magnificat. We just sang a beautiful paraphrase of it for our Song of Praise.

How can Mary sing that the Lord *has done* great things for her?

I’ll talk about Mary’s incredible contribution, intelligence and strength in a minute. But first we’ve got some ground-clearing to do.

We remind ourselves that Mary was a girl from the lower classes of Israelite society; she finds herself pregnant, outside of any kind of “safe” social arrangement; Joseph takes some convincing and without his help she’d be all on her own in a hostile environment for an unwed teenager, to say the least.

So that’s her “reality” we would say; “her life is ‘off the rails’” we might add with a wag of the head.

But here she is saying, in the past tense, that God has already ended injustice and oppression, for the nations? For her??

I mean, all Mary has to do is look around her to see massive evidence of the contrary. Is she crazy?

Okay, there are the angelic appearances but from all the evidence we have, these do not, on their own—just look at Zechariah’s experience—bring complete clarity or confidence.

Later on, as Paul writes in one of his first letter, the letter to the Galatians, angels aren’t really a “knock-dead proof.” There he says, that “even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.”

This, presumably, because some early would-be followers of Jesus were claiming angelic sanction. Whatever we make of angels, and they certainly are important in Mary’s story, they are not the ground of Mary’s faith

Perhaps it is what she has just experienced in our gospel reading today; Elizabeth equating her with the woman the prophet Micah writes about in our first reading.

Combined with what the angel has said, they are certainly powerful words!

But words are words; what she sees would clash with them; there is evidence of Rome everywhere, there are the financial and hunger pains that come from the double taxation of Rome and Israel’s leaders.

And of course the physical reality that is unfolding inside her outside the married state!

The clash between words spoken to her and what her senses scream at her must have been intense!

Part of our struggle in understanding Mary is grammar. In English we normally say: I was at the mall doing my shopping or I’m at the mall shopping or I will go to the mall on Christmas Eve because I love doing my shopping during the mad rush.

With the omicron variant afoot that might not happen this year but still, there you have it, past, present and future tenses.

When translating from the New Testament, English scholars have to wrestle with the fact that there are different tenses in Greek. Mary’s beautiful poetry is in what is called the Aorist tense.

Most of the poem is in this tense. It sounds simply like the past: God has acted, God has remembered me, his lowly servant, God has brought down might kings and lifted up the lowly.

But it also contains a future potential, it’s the already that has happened and the not yet that can be banked on because of what has happened in the past.

This can be hard to understand but it’s actually the tense that helps us understand what Christian faith is. Christian faith rests on the fact that how God has acted in the past will be how God continues to act

God the Creator has acted to reconcile the Creation; that work has begun as all the prophets testify and it will continue.

This understanding helps us understand Mary not merely under some emotional swoon (not dissing emotions) but a person expressing an intelligent faith in the God revealed to Israel!

it means she’s literate, and not just literate but deeply taught and committed; as a teenager of “lower class” she’s as articulate as any of the great prophets, which is astounding;.

It very well may be the case that God needed to choose one of the unwashed billions, one from among the vast majority of human beings who have tromped this earth, a commoner, a poor waif, someone who would never have been noticed but she was not “common” in her faith!

In this brilliant poetry we see someone who is no mere “recipient,” the exemplar of humility; someone whom the Church has sought to domesticate under a halo of perpetual virginity, but a someone who is wrestling with the enormity of what God is doing *in* her; someone who is coming, in real time, to a self-awareness and confidence, that is almost unparalleled in ancient literature.

All the while expressing that knowledge in this perfectly balanced understanding of God’s actions in Israel.

She is definitely not crazy; though the line between faith and crazy sometimes does seem razor-thin. She is the exemplar of what it means to respond to God’s astounding work of joining us in the flesh.

She experienced the promised Christ inside her so that you and I can say “Christ in *us*, the hope of glory!”

As Mary shows us, it’s never a matter of God doing the work alone; it’s always a matter of God initiating and us, responding. God enters the world in a dramatic, though largely hidden way, this will change everything

Next week we celebrate the One in whom everything changes but this week we remind ourself that that change requires the assurance of faith proclaimed by Mary. A faith that is not just proclaiming a past event, though it is a past event.

Nor is it proclaiming a future in which utopia has arrived. It is a past event that will become a future reality as we live into it now.

Christ’s incarnation, his becoming flesh and then his work on the cross are entirely sufficient to reconcile all things and make all things new; they dealt, past tense, with all our injustices, oppressions and the challenges before us now.

But as finite beings we can never be transformed all at once. The “all at once, let’s have that done yesterday” desire is ever our problem. It’s the desire to have a “special experience, maybe an angelic appearance, or something else that will make everything alright.

It’s the desire at the heart of our original story, the two humans who wanted all, to master all, now, and so found themselves adrift, separated, further from what they wanted.

In order for the infinite to be joined with the finite God needs to work gradually, *with* us; yes, God works *for* us, but always *in* us and *through* us.

We learn from this common yet one-of-a-kind teenage woman that it is faith in this way of God that helps us live with uncertainty, helps us live with hope, as we birth children, as slog through another winter of covid, dare proclaim the great now and not yet of God with us!