

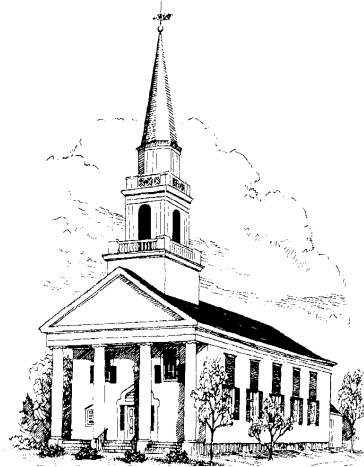
Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from December 24, 2006

Rev. Patricia L. Liberty
“A Heart Like Mary”

Scriptures:
Micah 5:2-5a
Luke 1:39-55



“One liability of having heard the Christmas story over and over again is that you know how it all turns out. There’s no way to recapture the initial shock of the news that God is coming in the flesh to show us what real life looks like. For the last couple of weeks, John the Baptist has been the messenger of that news. If you’ve been here or you’ve kept up with the lessons on your own, you know that the news has not been all that good—lots of talk about axes and pitchforks and unquenchable fires not to mention being likened to snakes in the grass or vipers, to be exact; vipers who only see God when our own snake pits are on fire.” (*Barbara Brown Taylor, “Home by Another Way”*)

A second liability is that we need to suspend our rational thinking patterns. We have a tendency to look at the Bible as a historic, factual account: in this case, of events leading up to Jesus’ birth. It’s easy to approach the Bible a little bit like an addition of Dateline: NBC whose long and complicated story unfolds in an hour, less commercials, with the interest of neutral journalism preserved. Related to that is our twenty-first century knowledge of all things biology and the struggle to reconcile what we know to be objectively true with the stories that are presented in Scripture.

One of my favorite comments on the first chapter of Luke comes from William Willimon who is the dean of the chapel at Duke University. He tells the story of a college student talking to him about how the virgin birth was just too incredible to believe. Willimon looked at him and responded, “You think that’s incredible? Come back next week. Then we’ll tell you that God has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. We’ll talk about the hungry having enough to eat and the rich being sent away empty. The virgin birth—you think you have trouble with the Christian faith now? Just wait. That’s a little miracle. The really incredible stuff comes next week.”

Biblical stories were never intended to be history, at least as we understand it. They were the faith statements of the writers. They reflected the faith of the community that claimed Jesus as prophet, priest and sovereign. So this sermon comes, perhaps, with a bit of a warning label: “Caution. This sermon may challenge commonly-held beliefs about all things Christmas.”

In the verses that precede today's reading, the Angel Gabriel pays Mary a visit. Most of the time, when angels visit people, it scares the daylight out of them. Usually, the first words out of an angel's mouth are, "Do not be afraid." Mary was no exception. No doubt, it was partly her age and her marital status—no more than fourteen years old and single in a time and place where women had no rights. No doubt, it was partly the time—wrenching poverty for all but a very few, political oppression from Rome, and the capricious rule of Caesar who granted favors to insiders in the form of political appointments over parts of the kingdom. Caesar owed some nasty people for, surely, Herod and his cronies were not selected for their people skills.

Whether it all happened as it says or not, I do not know. But what is clear is that Mary took a huge risk to say "Yes" to God. By the time the Angel Gabriel was off to terrify his next victim with holy news, Mary had said, "Yes. Let it be to me according to your will." A God-barren life needs an open heart and an open spirit where the dream of God can grow.

Mary's "Yes" is real but it's a bit tentative. I guess that's too to be expected. How many of us have ever said "Yes" to God and really meant it, right off the bat? Most of what God has called me to involves conversations that range from "Who, me?" to "You must be joking." to "Yes, but ..." and, hopefully, all of that on the way to "Let it be to me according to your will." All of those other steps on the way can keep us from choking on the final "Yes". Mary says, "Yes". Perhaps, it's whispered.

Picking up our reading, she heads off to see her cousin, Elizabeth. Frank Griswold who is the immediate past presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church says, "It's my sense that it was out of mercy and kindness that the Angel Gabriel, before fleeing off that 'Oh, by the way, Mary, your kinswoman, Elizabeth, great in age and barren, is about to have a child. She is in her sixth month.' The subtext was, 'Maybe you should go and see her.'" Indeed, we're told in the Gospel that Mary rushed in haste to be with Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child in her womb leapt for joy. Elizabeth, filled with the spirit, cried out, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb". Blessed is she who believes that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

Hearing those words, I think Mary's "Yes" became a little more certain. There was a deeper surrender in that moment. Out of that more complete "Yes" provoked by that wonderfully human encounter with her kinswoman, Mary was able to sing, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

Henry Nouwen writes, "It was the healing power of intimacy that was needed. Intimacy is mutual vulnerability. Mary and Elizabeth found that safe space to be vulnerable with each other. Perhaps that's why the angel gave Mary a clue about her cousin's pregnancy. God was with Mary, to be sure, but sometimes we all need human hands and human

hearts that care to encourage us on a journey.”

I can imagine the excitement shared between Mary and her cousin, Elizabeth, as they shared the journey of motherhood together. It was a mysterious visitation but there was no jealousy, no hate, only unconditional acceptance. These two women came together sharing gifts of love and compassion. Elizabeth celebrated the moment with a blessing, remembering that, on the surface, neither of these women had much to celebrate.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were eligible for social security when they got the news of their impending bundle of joy. We know Mary’s situation. But now it reminds us that it’s in times of confusion that those who mean the most to us are those who, instead of giving much advice, solution or cure, rather choose to come and share the confusion with a gentle and tender hand—the friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can tolerate not knowing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness is, precisely, the friend who cares and brings the word of God that is most needed.

The intimacy shared by Mary and Elizabeth is a reminder that human companions who share the journey often strengthen God’s word in our lives. Their presence and witness help us move from the tentative “Yes” to a deeper and fuller “Yes” and more honest surrender to God’s call in our lives. I often describe my own often spiritual journey as one that contains few burning bushes but rather a series of glowing twigs, most of them pointed out like someone else.

There’s a final component to Mary and Elizabeth’s encounter that takes them from the intimate and the personal to the pathetic and the pastoral. They could have spent their entire visit talking about swollen ankles, appetite changes, mood swings, morning sickness and difficulty sleeping but they didn’t. Their encounter reminds us that the coming of God into our hearts is never just for us and for our own sake. Mary’s “Yes” becomes complete when it takes on that prophetic task that she connects God’s dream for creation with what’s happening in her own life.

Frank Griswold writes, “As the personal identifying word finds a home in us, we are drawn out of a place of safety and protection into the wildness of God’s imagination and desire for creation.” Mary’s witness is that the coming of God into our hearts is never just for us and for our own sake. Yes, it changes our lives but only for the sake of the world. So, right here, as that line between Advent and Christmas is as thin as it will ever be, what gets rooted for us in our tradition is a path of radical faithfulness. Saying “Yes” to God in a way that means our lives will never be the same.

Howard Thurman writes, “It is our great and blessed fortune that our lives are never left to themselves alone. We are visited in ways we can understand and in ways that will always be beyond our understanding by highlights, great moments of inspiration, quiet reassurances of grace, simple manifestations, the goodness of life. These quiet things enrich the common life and give to the ordinary experiences of our daily grind significance and strength that steadies and inspires. We are surrounded by the witnesses of those whose

strivings have made possible so much upon which we draw from the common reservoir of our heritage. Those who have persevered when to persevere seemed idiotic and suicidal, those who have forgotten themselves in the full and creative response to something that calls them beyond the farthest reaches of their own dreams and their own hopes and grounds them in all that God calls them to be.”

So, as this line between Advent and Christmas is as thin as it can ever be, it is our turn to carry the light and to persevere even against the odds. It is our turn to make our visitation, to deliver our gifts of care to persons along the journey. It is our turn and our responsibility to respond to the issues that yield to pain that we, and most everyone else, will endure from time to time.

As we go into this destiny that God lays out before us, we believe, like Elizabeth, blessed is the one that believes there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to you by the Lord. May that fulfillment be known in your life. Thanks be to God and amen.