

Having A Mary Christmas

^{NRS} **Luke 1:39** In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." ⁴⁶ And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

This week I hit the Portland Art Museum- they've got Raphael's La Donna Velata, or the Woman in the Veil right now. Up to this point I'd only seen Raphael's work in books- it was stunning to see it in person. It's in this dark little room, with a light shining down from up above as if from heaven- I half expected the woman to just step out of the canvas.

But as beautiful and mysterious as La Donna Velata is, I actually found myself captured by another piece- another portrait of a woman. In the wing you pass through to get to La Donna Velata on the left hand wall there is a large circular painting by Maybe it's because it's Christmas but I couldn't stop thinking about his Alba Madonna- this beautiful woman enfolding a serious looking Christ child and his cousin John the Baptist, both naked little cherubs.

As with so many of his pieces, the eyes tell you everything in the Alba Madonna. John is sitting down at her lap and is holding a tiny little cross, almost a toy, really. And

he's staring up at it- as if strangely aware of where this story was headed. Next to him in Mary's lap, sitting in it like it's a throne, is the Christ child, one hand just beginning to take hold of the cross, with this incredible, serious expression on his little face. But in the center, in the center is this beautiful woman, one hand holding a Bible, the other cradling the two babes, and her eyes both look at the cross and somehow, and this is the genius of Raphael, looking off past it as well- as if looking into the distance, into future. And she seems sad, tragically sad, so aware of the suffering her little boy would endure.

Now some people criticize the way Raphael and other renaissance painters depict Mary- as this older, mature woman in these European clothes. And this is probably fair- she probably was a great deal younger, and certainly not European. But one thing they get absolutely right- Mary's pain. Their willingness and ability to portray Mary's pain is absolutely spot on.

Because it's a painful story, isn't it? It's certainly not one you would choose for your daughter. This little girl, probably about 14 or 15 although maybe younger, she's married off to Joseph, probably a much older man, and you can imagine her just trying to even think about what this new life would be like with this strange man. Her parents seem excited, though, although it's probably more relief than excitement- they're just happy to be getting her off their hands.

Arranged marriage in the ancient world is already a challenging story for anyone even remotely able to think about life from the perspective of the young girl- but then, on top of all this, that angel comes to her, Gabriel comes to her with the news that this story was heading in an even stranger and more confusing direction, a direction that none of them, least of all her, was prepared for. Mary, this child, who had only heard rumors

about what men were like, and what having children was like- she was told that she, she herself, was already pregnant. And her child wouldn't be any ordinary child, either, but the Son of God. And then, and this is what I love about angels, their sense of humor, Gabriel tells her not to be afraid.

Don't be afraid. Really? Did he really think that was possible?

The thing I don't get with Mary is how she did it. How she made it through the shock of this story, and then the pain of knowing that the life that was being planned out for her by her family, the life that would be acceptable in her world- that this life was all of a sudden, absolutely, and without question, over. I don't understand how she made it through the pain of that look in her parent's eyes, of Joseph's eyes. And then on top of that the pain of knowing that not only would no one around was going to believe her story about an angel, but that they would revel in making her the talk of the town, the example of bad values, the one they can point to and say well at least I'm not like THAT.

It just seems an extraordinary amount of pain for one so young.

Fred Buechner knew this kind of pain. Fred is a Presbyterian pastor, but he's famous for his writing. One time he was down in my neck of the woods- he was down in Kerrville, Texas in the Texas hill country leading a retreat at Mo-Ranch the church camp out there. One night someone asked Buechner if he wouldn't mind sharing a little bit more about what life was like when was growing up. And he shared a story from one of his books.

He was ten years old. It was the end of the Great Depression. But, and we're beginning to know a little bit about this, just because the depression was ending on wall

street didn't mean folks on main street were feeling much better. His father had lost so much, and Fred was too young to really understand just how bad it was, but he knew it wasn't good. Well it was Christmas time, and his dad had started to drink more and more heavily trying to escape the season. And one night, after Fred was already in bed, he woke up to the sound of his father stumbling in the door- he could tell from the noise, he'd been drinking. He heard a muffled argument between his mom and his dad. Then, he heard footsteps hurrying to his door, and his mom came in and pressed the cold car keys into his soft, warm hands. "Don't let your father have these," she told him. And she left.

Well, it didn't take his dad long to figure out what had happened and he came into Fred's room. The boy had tucked the keys between his two pillows, and he pretended to be asleep. But his father, half out of his mind, shook Fred awake. And he told him to give him the keys, that he needed the keys, that he just had to get out of there. Fred just kept telling his dad he didn't know where they were, and he tried to pull the covers up over his head, but his dad just kept at him and at him. Finally, after what felt like hours but was probably only minutes, his dad just gave up and collapsed on the floor, and Fred fell asleep with his father's cries in his ears.

When he was done telling the story, the man who had invited Fred there went over to him. And in the silence he sat next to him and put his arm around him and Fred said the man told him the most interesting thing anyone had ever told him. The man said, "Fred, thank you. You have been a good steward of your pain."

A good steward of his pain? Fred said he had never thought about pain like that before- or stewardship either. And it changed his life. For the rest of his life, he said, he mostly wrote about what it means for people to be good stewards of their pain.

See, to be a good steward of our pain means to realize that pain really is part of life- and that it can, from time to time, even be a gift. For whenever we are able to recognize our pain, to honor it's presence in our lives- we become more human. When we become good stewards of our pain, we become more open to the radical ways God is and has been working in our lives; we become more open to others, more compassionate, more sympathetic. We become more alive because we realize how fragile, how precious, the good things we have really are.

Christmas is such a hard season for so many of us. There is a lot of pain this time of year. Part of it is the expectations, I think- we all have these ideas about what Christmas OUGHT to be like. And most of these are ideas based on a past that is not only irretrievably gone, but, if you were to actually travel back in time, would probably not be QUITE as perfect and rosy as our memories recall. And if it isn't our own expectations for the season- it's everyone else around us. It's like once a year the world around us goes insane, thinking it makes sense to schedule 9 dinner parties, visit relatives, and buy presents for a zillion people, and be HAPPY and joy-filled the entire time. And if anyone does has the temerity to be having an off day we assign them names like Grinch or Scrooge.

We also think about the people we miss a little more during Christmas. We notice that empty chair or two at the table. And we think about our own relationships

with the people with us, the ones we love- and if they don't quite measure up we find ourselves wondering what went wrong. Was it something we did? Something we didn't do? If we had done something differently?

Most of time we just try and bury it, the pain. Most of the time we just try and put the thoughts out of our head and move on- knowing life has a harder time hitting a moving target.

This is what Mary was doing. I love that line that opens her story- about her hastening to Elizabeth. Hastening. You bet she was. She was flat out running- running away. Running away from the looks on people's faces- the looks on her parent's faces. The look in Joseph's eyes. She was flat out running away- hoping to find a place to hide out.

Of course sometimes it's just the opposite. Sometimes we revel in our pain, feeling sorry for ourselves, saying 'poor me'- using this to get sympathy from others or to manipulate.

But to be good stewards of our pain. To honor where we have been hurt. To acknowledge what is out of joint in our lives, without hiding from it or wallowing in it- what would this even look like?

Well, it looks like Mary. Oh Mary had it made there for a while. She had successfully escaped from her parent's home and she had made it through the desert. She was going to go to Elizabeth's and maybe just stay there until the baby came. And

maybe she could find someone to take care of it. Maybe Elizabeth would want it? But she surely didn't want to deal with the pain of the shame and humiliation that was headed her way if she hung around. So she fled. It's what any of us would do.

But dang it- there was Elizabeth. As soon as Mary came inside Elizabeth practically fell on her knees in front of Mary and told her she knew Mary was pregnant and how great she thought it was.

And that's when Mary had a choice. Mary had a choice- right at that moment she could have done the normal thing and fled out the door to go and find somewhere else, somewhere where people hadn't heard the news. Or, she could stay and face it.

Now, the church gets all excited about the miraculous birth of Jesus- and we should. What this week I was actually more impressed with how Mary stayed- with how she faced up to the painful, harsh new reality of her life, and trusted Elizabeth and trusted God to see her through this.

And what Mary discovers is that when she faces her pain- it doesn't destroy her, it doesn't ruin her. Not even close. When she faces her pain, she realizes that far from being the end of her life, it truly is a new beginning. And, at least from the perspective of her old life, having lost it all, she felt that exhilarating freedom of a fresh start- seeing how God not only was with her the whole time, but how God would continue to walk with her no matter what.

(More here- pain opening her to the pain of others- the weak, the poor, the hungry. And opening her to God's presence in all this fragility.)

If you get a chance over the next few weeks, go check out Raphael's La Donna Velata. Just remember... (Some clever ending...) If not a merry Christmas- than a Mary one with some time to name what is hurting, not to wallow in it, but to hold it up to God's grace in the hopes that healing may come, maybe not as soon as we'd like, but it will come all the same..

Now, this may sound strange. But I've come to think as hard as they are- that stories like this make Christmas bearable. I really do. Hear me out.

But, for those with ears to hear, underneath all of the bright lights, underneath all of the glitter and tinsel of Christmas, we also have stories like Mary's story. Mary, who was NOT going to be showing her face at the parties, and who certainly was not having a very merry Christmas at all. Skipping the family gathering, running away under the cover of darkness to the only relative she can think off, Elizabeth, the black sheep of the family herself because she had no children- everyone always whispering about her, always wondering what she did wrong or what terrible secret mistake she had made that God gave her no children. No, for actual human beings, people who know joy and sorrow, especially at this time of year- Mary's pain almost makes ours bearable.