

Not Running, but Dancing

Luke 1:39-56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said, "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 thoughts 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. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

When I first studied Greek, I took this horrendous intensive course as an undergrad where we did 2 full years of Greek packed into one very, very full summer. We had class from 8 in the morning until 4, and then we had enough homework to keep us busy long into the night. One of my homework buddies was a guy named Jim, a young man who was headed for the priesthood. Some nights I would head over to the manse where he lived with a few local priests. I remember late one night as we were studying, one older priest came in and had with him two pictures of Mary he found for James' kid sister. James thanked him and asked why he brought two instead of just the one he asked for. And the old priest looked at him over his half moon glasses and said, "Well you picked out Our Sorrowful Mother. She's great for you, but not right for a

young girl, I think. So I brought you another as well. Up to you.” And I took a break from my aorists and pluperfects to take a look.

They were both images of Mary and Jesus. But they were as different as could be- one a pieta showing Mary holding the crucified body of Jesus, the sorrowful Mary looking somehow so old, and so haggard, it was as if she had been hanging up there on that cross. The second picture showed a much younger Mary, a much more hopeful Mary, gazing down at her child with this look of wonder in her eyes. After comparing the two, James thanked the priest and agreed with his judgment, leaving the sorrowful mother for another time, perhaps.

To James it was just a simple decision. For me it was a whole new world. I mean at that point in my fairly Presbyterian life, I knew Jesus had a mother, of course. I’d read the Greatest Christmas Pageant Ever. But I never really thought about Mary before. Who she was. What she was like. What it was like to be the mother of Jesus. These two images, simple as they were, helped me begin to see Mary with new eyes, with a new sense of appreciation for how many sides to her there are.

Since then, my eyes were opened further. In seminary I learned to see Mary as more than just a mother- hopeful or not. I learned to see Mary as nothing less than the first theologian in the New Testament. In Luke’s Gospel after the angel Gabriel gives her the life changing news that she was going to need to change her prom plans and exchange her backpack for booties, and after what he says comes to pass and Jesus is born, Mary does something no other figure in the New Testament had yet done- she treasures what has taken place and ponders it all in her heart. Literally, what Mary does is *suneteren*

(she gathers everything that's happened together) and then she *sumballein* (she throws it all together), pondering, reflecting, thinking about it all. This is precisely what theology is about- taking everything that happens to us, gathering it all up in our thoughts, and pondering it, reflecting on it, thinking about it. Every great theologian you can think of from Karl Barth to John Calvin to Aquinas- they all have Mary to look to for their example.

Moreover, I learned there were huge conversations about Mary in the early church- huge debates and conferences. What everyone was all a twitter about was whether Mary should be called Theotokos, meaning God bearer, or whether she should just be called Christotokos, or Christ bearer. Some were terribly upset to imagine that Mary, a mere woman, could possibly bear the one Holy God become flesh in her...gasp...womb! No, better, they said was the thought that Mary bore the human Jesus, who, like, the instant he popped out THEN became God. So, she could bear Christ, they said, but surely not God.

Now given how we've all been taught to think about the ancient world and what a male dominated place it could be- I was shocked to learn that an overwhelming majority of the early church fathers said Mary was indeed Theotokos, God bearer, rather than demoting her to Christotokos, just because she was a woman.

So Mary was that young girl with a new baby and all of the hope in the world, she was the mother of the crucified one, carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. She was the mother of God, the Theotokos. And she was the first theologian, the to

whom all other theologians should look. And all of this is great, all of this is important, but this week as I spent time with Mary, I realized there was still something missing, there is still a part of Mary we leave out. And it's the image of Mary as the first poet, the first person in the Gospels to break into song.

She certainly wasn't the first person to have the chance. Mary isn't the first person the angel Gabriel meets. The angel first surprises the priest Zechariah- telling him his wife who had never had a child would give birth to a son named John. Now if ever there was a time to sing, that was the time. But being around the sacred too much- ironically it can make one less sensitive to God's presence in the world rather than more. And Zechariah, used to being in control, asked for the one thing that God and angels hate- he wanted proof. He said, "How can I know these things will take place?" Understandable? Yes. Poetry? Hardly.

And until his son is born Zechariah is struck mute- a priest without the ability to bless.

But when the angel goes to Mary, instead of asking for proof- she just wonders how this amazing thing can happen. It's a similar question but enough different than the angel smiles instead of frowns. Where Zechariah wants proof, Mary marvels. And she's only just getting started.

Immediately after the angel tells Mary about Jesus and about Elizabeth, her cousin, Mary tears out of her house. She doesn't ask for permission. She doesn't leave a note. She just bolts out of there.

And when she makes it to Elizabeth's place, the minute she's in the door- both of them just erupt. Elizabeth cries out: "Blessed are you among woman, Mary- and blessed is the baby in your womb!" And in response, like a scene out of Singin' in the Rain- Mary bursts into the first poem, the first song in the New Testament: The Magnificat.

Mary isn't the first person in the New Testament to know what it is to be moved beyond words- to feel something so powerful and so important that it must be expressed, but can't be- at least not in the ordinary way. But Mary is the first person to shape these feelings into poetry.

And I wonder if this isn't the most important way to see Mary, as the first poet? At least for the church today. The church in the world today is long on answers, but so desperately short on meaning. We have Books of Order, Constitutions, and enough Creeds that we could all stand and spit out the "right answers" for days. We have pastors who pretend to have every answer and who actually seem to believe they not only understand the mind of God but speak for God as well. And we have created a nation of Christians who, to everyone else out there, appear to think that with all going on in the world that what God really cares about MOST, MOST is who is sleeping with whom (and how).

A lot of you asked me about the Oregonian article a couple of weeks ago about churches in Portland worried about people not coming. Well you know what I think? I think it's the wrong question- asking why are people not coming. That's the wrong question. The real question is why should they come? Why should they? Why should we expect anyone to come if we've forgotten to sing like Mary? Why should they come

if we'd rather fight amongst ourselves than write verse for a tired world about what it's like to be filled with the love of God and follow after the way of the Son in the far country?

Now hear me well- I love the church. I've devoted my life the church, and I'm not going anywhere. We have so much to offer the world. So much. But we've allowed ourselves to become more like Zechariah than Mary. We're more obsessed with having to know we're right about everything than we are shocked into song about what God has done, is doing, and will do in our midst in the days ahead. So I say, until we learn how follow mother Mary, than I suggest we worry less about why "those" people aren't coming in "our" doors, and ask ourselves whether we have any news good enough to share.

I have two rules when I preach. The first is that I will always tell you the truth. I will never stand up here and talk about things I think I'm supposed to say, but I'm not really sure about. I will always tell you the truth as raw as I can. And the second is that I will never ask you to do anything I'm unwilling to do myself. I just don't think that's right.

And so in that vein- I'd like to stop preaching, and start singing. In memory of Mary I offer you a spoken word piece I'm calling "Not Running but Dancing":

Not Running, But Dancing

She wasn't running away
She wasn't running away to hide her face
She wasn't digging a hole a thousand miles deep with a shovel of shame
 To bury her poor, tender head
She wasn't throwing up her arms around her body
 Like guard rails on Highway 101
 The only thing keeping her from falling into that fir-tossing

Rock crushing
Blue depression beneath

She wasn't running away
She wasn't running at all.

Not running, but dancing

Dancing to a song only the heart can hear
Dancing without the help a husband to lead the way
Dancing without a sonogram in hand
 The black and white hazy little alien
 The sometimes thumb sucking always certain proof
 That this little life was coming and she was not making it up
Dancing without an affidavit¹ from the Holy Spirit stating:
 “To whom it may concern. This child is mine. So put down your rocks.
 The rocks in your hands
 The worse rocks flying from your mouths
 Falling from the loose rocks in your heads
Put down your rocks and leave the girl alone.
 She's just scared. And so are you.

She was dancing
 Dancing across the desert at night
 Dancing across the moon drenched sand
 Dancing across the rules, across the expectations
 Dancing across “But this isn't how we do it around here.”
 Dancing across “Nice girls don't get knocked up.
 And nice girls DEFINITELY
 Don't get knocked and then lie about it.”
 Holy Spirit? Holy cow, girl. You couldn't come up
 With something better than that?
 (Even if you did believe it.)

She was dancing
 Dancing across “What are they saying about me?”
 Dancing across her own voice saying, “There are things you can do to
 jack up your life and you can never, ever fix it.”

She was dancing across.
 Dancing a cross.
 Dying to the girl they wanted her to be
 Rising to become a mystery.
 And this strange stranger coming to be
 She can't wipe this girl's smile off her face
 Get the song out of her mouth
 And she can't keep this strange girl's feet from moving

¹ The images of “affidavit from the Holy Spirit” and “sonogram” come from a beautiful sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor, “Singing Ahead of Time”. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way* (Cowley Publications, Boston: 1999), p. 18.

Who they will be, she wonders?

Her and this little one hitching a ride, growing inside
Whoever they'll be never has been
And yet somehow always was, is, and ever shall be, she thinks
Scattering the proud
Filling the hungry
And lifting up what has been held down
For far. Too. Long.

She was dancing that night

Dancing for herself and all the girls like her
The girls who became pregnant when the world said they shouldn't
The girls who couldn't or didn't become pregnant
when the world said they should
The girls who gave up their little ones
Or lost them and died a little inside as the dream of their baby
Slipped slowly away
For these she danced and dances still

She danced for the son growing inside her body

And all the boys like him
Boys who have to look to their father in heaven
Because the one here on earth keeps forgetting to call
The boys who will grow up to care for women
As they were cared for by them
The boys who will stand up and say, "Don't talk to her like that.
She's just scared. And so are you."
For these she danced and dances still

She danced for Abraham and his children

You are one of them. And so am I.
Synagogue, mosque, and church. Synagogue, mosque, and church.
All Abraham. All the time.
And what we have in common is so much more
Than the fear that drives us apart
For these, the least of these, she danced and dances still

She wasn't running that night but dancing.

And if it could happen to her, it could happen to you
To me. Do you see?
Do you see what I see? Do you hear what I hear?

Because there's music in the air, everywhere

A song an angel is singing that only the heart can hear
And if you hear it
Even a little
If it gets inside of you
Even a little
Then when you leave this place
You won't be running away
You'll be dancing.

And Beloved, may our hearts be open to the music, this Christmas, our mouths ready to sing, and our feet eager to dance. And may our souls, may all our souls, magnify the Lord. **Amen.**