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Westmoreland Congregational United Church of Christ
Bethesda, Maryland

Sunday, December 18, 2016
4th Sunday of Advent
10:00 AM

“Congratulations!”

Luke 1:26-49

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And the angel came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! God is with you.”

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her,

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Holy One, your God, will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of our God; let it be with me according to your word.”

Then the angel departed from her. 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 our God.”

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Holy One, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God’s name.”

When I say, Big Ten, you may think of college athletics. The Big Ten is the oldest Division I football conference in the nation. For reasons known only to God, the Big Ten currently has 14 member universities: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, Nebraska, Northwestern, Ohio State, Penn State, Purdue, Rutgers, and Wisconsin. (Thank you for not cheering.)

But for those of us in the church “business,” during the Christmas season especially, the “Big Ten” are the top ten Christmas carols, the ten favorites that everyone wants to hear. We’re singing three of the “big ten” carols” today, and—fear not!—between today, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and New Year’s Day (which is actually the second Sunday of Christmas) we will sing our way through all ten of them. Here’s the list (again, no cheering): “Angels from the Realms of Glory,” “Angels We Have Heard on High,” “Away in a Manger,” “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” “It Came Upon A Midnight Clear,” “Joy to the World,” “O Come All Ye Faithful,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” “Silent Night,” and “The First Nowell.”

Michael Linton, who is a music professor at Middle Tennessee State University, has done some interesting study of these “top ten” Christmas carols.

And he points out that, of the “big ten,” only four of the carols refer to Mary. And almost none of them call her by name.

Mary makes a brief appearance in verse two of “O Come All Ye Faithful,” which we will sing at the end of the service. And you will see the very strange phrase there that Jesus, “abhors not the virgin’s womb.” Which is a strange affirmation of one’s mother.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, makes a brief appearance in the second verse of “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” (where we sing that “Christ is born of Mary”). Mary makes

a brief appearance in the second verse of, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” (where we sing about “offspring of the virgin’s womb”—again, she’s not even mentioned by name there, just her type). And Mary appears in “Silent Night,” in that interesting phrase “round yon virgin,” which has left generations of Sunday School children wondering if Mary was a bit plump.

“The First Nowell,” which we will sing during communion, is the longest of the big ten carols. It originally had nine verses. We’ll only sing six today. In nine verses, Mary is completely ignored. Professor Linton points out that those nine verses mention: the poverty of the shepherds, the cold weather, the bright star, the homeland of the magi, the mental condition of the magi, the gifts the magi bring, the local livestock, and even the substantive nature of divine creation (which the hymn writer says was “of naught”), and, in a verse which no one sings anymore, the hymn writer appears to be a universalist saying that “God hath prepared for us all a resting place in general.” Not a word about Mary in nine verses.

The carol, “Angels from the Realms of Glory,” is also long. There are six verses. The writer talks about angels, shepherds, magi, saints in heaven, sinners, and even predicts how the world will end. But not a word about Mary.

Why do we overlook Mary?

Another writer, one of my UCC colleagues, Nancy Rockwell, has pointed out that, so often, when we do mention Mary, we gloss over her. We picture her as meek and mild and mindless. We tend to hold her up as this sweet, acquiescent, agreeable—mostly silent character—whose role is simply to be a vessel for Jesus’s birth. She’s just the humble dish in which the main course is prepared.

And because there aren’t many women who play major roles in our Christian

tradition, Nancy Rockwell says that this idea of a quiet, meek Mary has served as a way to subjugate, to hush women in the Christian tradition and in society at large.

Truthfully, we don't know much about Mary or about her giving birth to Jesus, for that matter. Two of the Gospels—Mark and John—say nothing about Jesus' birth. The Gospel of Matthew focuses mostly on Joseph as a supportive stepfather to Jesus. Only the Gospel of Luke tells us the story of Mary. And it's really a story of a brave, strong, confident, trailblazing woman.

Let's look at the story again...

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph....The virgin's name was Mary.

(There's a long, complicated explanation of all this "virgin" business. It has to do with Luke and the prophet Isaiah and translating from Hebrew and Greek and all that. We will save that for another time. But...)

...the angel came to Mary and said, "Greetings, favored one! God is with you." She was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary...:

Here's the deal: Mary wasn't afraid. At least the text doesn't say that. The text says she was "perplexed by his words" and wondered what kind of greeting this was. But it does not say she was afraid.

So, let's imagine... Imagine Ivanka Trump rolling up to your house in a chauffeured Range Rover and saying, "Greetings! My dad wants you to be the

Secretary of Agriculture.” And then imagine her saying, “Don’t be afraid.”

You might say, “I’m not afraid. I’m perplexed and confused by what you’re saying, but I’m not afraid.” The image of a fearful, trembling Mary does not come from Mary.

Then Gabriel goes on to make his big announcement.

“Mary, you have found favor with God. You will conceive and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and he will be called the Son of the Most High, and God will give him the throne of King David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

That’s a fairly weighty pronouncement. “Congratulations,” the messenger says. And Mary replies by saying basically, “What?!” Actually, she says, *“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”*

She doesn’t fall to the ground. She doesn’t start to weep. She doesn’t run hide in the house.

She basically says, “Thanks for the ‘mansplaining,’ buddy, you don’t know what you’re talking about. Clearly you’re not from around her, because that is not how things work.”

Mary is not meek and submissive. She’s smart, she’s savvy. She has opinions. In fact, she argues with God’s messenger.

Mary is not some mild, passive, minor character. She is wise to the ways of the world. Mary may be a skeptic. You could even say she argues with God.

Which is what brave, faithful people have done forever. When a messenger told Sarah that she was going to have a baby at age 90, she laughed. When God wanted to destroy a town, Abraham haggled with God. When God wanted Moses

to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, Moses said, “Not me, God.” Even Jesus seemed to have bartered with God, “Let this cup pass from me.”

These are not simple-minded, submissive people. These are the giants of our tradition who speak boldly and bravely and justly. Christianity does not ask people to sit around and stare at their feet. Our faith calls us to live boldly. And Mary provides an example of that. She is smart and bold and brave.

Nancy Rockwell lifts up a specific point about Mary. She says, “The angel’s invitation and [Mary’s] independent decision tell us Mary does not need permission of clergy—or her parents—to become pregnant.” As we live in a time when women’s healthcare choices are in peril, that is an important idea. Nancy Rockwell says, “God knows Mary owns her own body. And there is no shame in her decision. Mary is good news for unwed mothers everywhere.” That is a brave and important word.

Gabriel and Mary chat back and forth a bit more. He tells Mary that her cousin Elizabeth is going to have a baby also. And the text says, “...*Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country.*”

The Judean hill country is about a hundred miles from Nazareth. And off goes Mary! Some people say that Mary’s family was embarrassed that she was going to have a child, so they sent her away to live with her cousin Elizabeth for a while. Maybe so. That’s just a guess.

The text just says, *Mary set out and went.*

It doesn’t say she asked her parents. It doesn’t say she talked to Joseph. It doesn’t say she took anyone with her. It just says “*she set out and went.*” What we

see in the Gospel is a picture of a brave, independent, confident woman who has purpose, a mission, and a task. And she does it.

Mary goes to Elizabeth's house. They greet each other. We learn that Elizabeth is also a remarkable woman. The Gospel says she was "*filled with the Holy Spirit*"—that's the same phrase used to describe the prophet Micah and the Apostle Paul. The Gospel then says that Elizabeth blesses Mary—that is the role of priests. What we see here is Elizabeth, another strong woman, filling the roles often associated with men—Elizabeth is a prophet, an apostle, a priest.

And Mary responds to Elizabeth's blessing with this brilliant song. We call it the Magnificat, because in Latin Mary begins with the word, "Magnify." We only read a part of it today. But hear again what Mary says, "*My soul magnifies the Holy One, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant.*" This is not just God doing for Mary, but also Mary magnifying God. Mary is amplifying, lifting up God. This is a partnership of equals. And we don't need to assume that because Mary talks about the "lowliness of God's servant," that she thought ill of herself. No doubt, Mary knew that poor, Palestinian, Jewish peasant women were at the bottom of the pecking order in imperial Rome. She had no connections to the throne. She was not a Temple insider in Jerusalem. But there's no indication that Mary thought she was useless or worthless. I think this is just a sign that she had clear eyes to see how the world works. In fact, she saw in her lowliness tremendous possibility. Mary was a woman of vision: She saw God's favor in her life.

Mary follows the "lowly servant" sentence with these bold words: "Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done

great things for me, and holy is God's name."

I hear in that sentence Sojourner Truth's great line, "Ain't I a woman." Or Maya Angelou's, "Still I Rise." Or the words I quoted a few weeks ago from Celie in The Color Purple, "...I may be ugly and can't cook...but I'm here."

Mary may not get good press coverage in the "big ten" Christmas carols, but she sings her own song with courage and conviction. It is a song for all of us. A song that respects and lifts up women as full and equal partners in the work of God and in the ways of the world.

Mary's Magnificat is a sacred version of, "On Wisconsin," and "Hail to the Victors," rolled into one. This is "Holy, Holy, Holy," and "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee," sung at the same time. Mary does not invite women to sit quietly in the corner and let the world ignore or abuse them. She sings a sacred version of "Rule Britannia" and "La Marseillaise." This is the Bible's version of Katie Perry's "Fight Song" and Freddie Mercury's "We are the Champions" mashed together.

Mary invites us to warm up our voices and rise to the occasion. With hope, with courage, with boldness, with equality, she invites us to join the song that turns the world upside down.

Meister Eckhart, a 13th century German mystic, wrote, "*We are all called to be mothers of God—for God is always waiting to be born.*"

With Mary as our guide, let us welcome God to be born in the world.

Sources:

Michael Linton, "Looking for Mary in Christmas, Carols," *First Things*. June 18, 2008.
Nancy Rockwell, "No More Lying about Mary," *Patheos*. December 3, 2015.