

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 20 December 2015
A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman
Advent 4C

Micah 5: 2-5a; Contemporary Reading (see page 4); **Luke 1:39-55**

A couple of months ago, National Geographic magazine named Mary as the most powerful woman in the world. But it was a rather disappointing article because it focused on miracles attributed to Mary and supposed sightings of her.

The article reminded me of the excessively ornate representations of Mary as the Queen of Heaven that I saw in ornate churches and cathedrals, in impoverished towns, in South America.

I am not really impressed by these claims. But I am interested in how progressive Christian people think about Mary. I care about the powerful story that we heard last week, of her encounter with an angel, telling her that the world would change through the child she will bear. And I'm compelled by her revolutionary song/in the passage in Luke's gospel known as the Magnificat.

When Mary learns that she is pregnant, her words in response to the angel are "*Let it be.*" "*Let it be according to your word.*" Oftentimes Mary is portrayed as compliantly, passively accepting what is happening to her. She is sometimes referred to as a vessel.

Our contemporary reading invites a different interpretation. Jan Richardson's reimagining tells of the angel Gabriel's great respect, even awe, for Mary. And Mary's "*Let it Be*" is recast as an assurance to the angel, and a declaration to the divine, that she is a woman up to the task that has been offered to her. Her '*yes*' is not passive. Her *Let it Be* is full of power and promise.

As I thought about the Annunciation and the Magnificat, the two parts of Mary's story, I realized that Mary's "*Let it Be*" in the Annunciation is best understood through the lens of the revolutionary message of the Magnificat.

Yes, "*Let it Be*" that I should have this child. But "*Let it Be*" also that the world should be transformed, turned upside down. Mary's song remembers, celebrates and anticipates/events that are revolutionary /in the purest sense of the word.

Let it be that kings are removed from their thrones. Let it be that the powerful, imposing their will by violence, war and occupation, will no longer shape the way of human community. Let it be that the lowly are elevated and dignified.

Let it be that the hungry are fed. Let it be that the rich lose their economic power. Just let it be. *Let it Be.*

Mary's words indicate she's just fed up with the way things are. And so she holds God to account, singing about revolution.

How shall we hear Mary's words in the context of a world at war, as our world has been since 2001? This week, Civilian areas of Syria, even where Islamic State is not active, are being subject to appalling aerial bombing by the US, Russia and their allies. And hawkish voices, here and in the US, are calling for a land war.

Do Mary's words and example have a prayer of being heard and effecting change in this time of war without end?

So much of the time, we are numbed to the war we are involved in - to a war that has now gone on, on multiple fronts, for fourteen years since September 11, 2001. Numb to the violence, and to the astronomical amounts of money that keep the war machine afloat.

And the 1500 people, including 70 children, on Nauru and Manus Island are the collateral damage of the ideology that has normalized war. People fleeing war are held hostage in off-shore hell holes so that no more people will try to come here to escape violence and persecution - that we are contributing to.

Luke's gospel portrays Jesus' mother as a woman living in an occupied country. A place where it was not safe to speak your mind or to talk of disrupting the peace of Rome, which was no peace at all for the occupied.

Mary, bearing the people's Saviour in her womb, considers her condition and surveys her religious convictions. Then she utters the conclusions she has reached: God must be on the verge of doing something. God will again be the source of change. Her pregnancy and hope provide all the evidence her conclusions need: God's Messiah will not leave the current state of affairs as they are - where the powerful humiliate and coerce the powerless.

If Jesus is indeed coming, something fundamental has to change. Mary doesn't just imagine a change; she demands it.

Mary's view of God won't let her resign to the current state of affairs.

She refuses to view long-term suffering - and the proliferation of victims as the sacrifices a society must offer to the guardians of the status quo - in exchange for security.

That is the source of her power.

Mary's speech is not made in public, but in a familial setting to her older cousin Elizabeth. There is no record of it having any public impact - but surely it tells of the religious values that Mary would, in time, impart to her child, Jesus. Mary was no passive vessel. She was a Jewish mother who raised a child who would change human hearts and change the world through love.

Mary's restlessness beautifully characterizes Advent - not just a season of slowing down and getting ready, and getting all introspective - and not for speeding up and shopping like crazy, but a time when Christians should survey the world and shout to God and each other and to the principalities and powers: "*Enough of this*".

Let it Be!

Let it be different - in our hearts, in our homes, in our cities, in our land, in our world.

Mary's revolutionary song embarrasses those of us who prefer to count our blessings. Its lyrics expose how docile and faltering we are in comparison to Mary. This soon to be refugee Mother offends our apathy.

Calling for a revolution that puts the human flourishing that God desires as the top priority, Mary still sings her song today.

The candles that we light during Advent, fragile flickering flames, remind us of Mary's stubborn belief that light will prevail against darkness and that love will make a way.

Her voice echoes in those who speak defiantly for human rights, racial, economic and environmental justice, for peace.

Like Mary we are called to be God bearers.

How will we use the power we have to declare and enact the future that God promises, now in our time?

How will we live with passion and compassion, giving birth to the God who is always waiting to be born?

And so now I invite you to hear again a song of Mary, this one written for our generation.

And to hear the words of wisdom that Mary brings.

Let it be. Let it be.

When all the broken-hearted people, living in the world agree.

There will be an answer.

Let it be.

Listen for words of faith by Jan Richardson,

"Gabriel's Annunciation"

For a moment
I hesitated
on the threshold.
For the space
of a breath
I paused,
unwilling to disturb
her last ordinary moment,
knowing that the next step
would cleave her life:
that this day
would slice her story
in two,
dividing all the days before
from all the ones
to come.

The artists would later
depict the scene:
Mary dazzled
by the archangel,
her head bowed
in humble assent,
awed by the messenger
who condescended
to leave paradise
to bestow such an honour
upon a woman, and mortal.

Yet I tell you
it was I who was dazzled,
I who found myself agape
when I came upon her -
reading, at the loom, in the kitchen,
I cannot now recall;
only that the woman before me -
blessed and full of grace
long before I called her so -
shimmered with how completely
she inhabited herself,
inhabited the space around her,
inhabited the moment
that hung between us.

I wanted to save her
from what I had been sent to say.
Yet when the time came,
when I had stammered
the invitation
(history would not record
the sweat on my brow,
the pounding of my heart;
would not note
that I said
Do not be afraid
to myself, as much as
to her)

It was she
who saved me -
her first deliverance-
her *Let it Be*
not just declaration
to, the Divine
but a word of solace,
of soothing,
of benediction
for the angel
in the doorway
who would hesitate
one last time -
just for the space
of a breath
torn from his chest -
before wrenching himself away
from her radiant consent,
her beautiful and
awful yes.

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