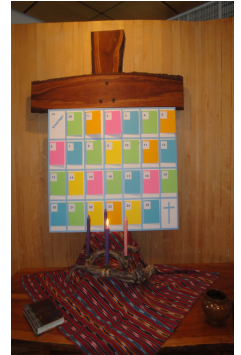


“Mary’s Hope” by David Lloyd

December 20, 2015



The Fourth Sunday of Advent

For reasons that I cannot understand, the portion of Luke’s Gospel in our lection for this week skips right past the Annunciation to Mary. When I knew that our Gospel passage would be from the first chapter of Luke I was all set to ask Glen to play those two beautiful versions of Ave Maria, one by Gounod and one by Schubert. I was waiting to hear the interchange between the angel and Mary. According to Luke the angel began by saying, “Greetings, most favored one. The Lord is with you.” When Mary responded with, essentially, “Huh? What do you mean?” the angel said the most important words, words that an angel had said to Zechariah, father of John the Baptist and husband of Mary’s relative Elizabeth, words said months later to shepherds out in the fields, words said to the people of God throughout history, words that we desperately need to hear: “Do not be afraid.” Then Luke has the angel tell her what was going to happen.

When the angel finished, Mary had reason to be afraid, but perhaps not why you think. It wasn’t because she was an unmarried pregnant teenage girl. Mary was betrothed to Joseph, which according to Lynn Cohick, in her book *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*, [\[1\]](#) was legally binding as a marriage; the only thing yet to happen was the wedding ceremony. Mary and Joseph wouldn’t be shamed if it was known they had had sex before the wedding. They wouldn’t be deemed to have committed fornication nor would the child be deemed illegitimate. There might be a few tongues that would wag, a few of Joseph’s cronies might tease him for a bit, but

it wouldn't last.

Mary's fear was not knowing what Joseph would do when he found out she was pregnant. Joseph would know that he was not the baby's father, which meant that Mary must have committed adultery. If Joseph loved her he could pretend to everyone else that they had had sex and the baby was his, but there might always be a shadow between them. Joseph could attempt to divorce her privately, which the Gospel of Matthew tells us he intended to do, by going to the rabbi and claiming his legal right under the Torah to a divorce on the grounds of her adultery. Worse, he could assert his right to a divorce publicly, which would be a huge scandal. If he chose either of these options, Mary would almost certainly have to leave Nazareth in shame. (Maybe that is why as an adult Jesus saved the woman caught in adultery by telling the crowd, "Let the one among you who has never sinned throw the first stone.")

Mary asked the angel, "How can this be?" and I wonder if some part of her might have been pleading, "Please God, say it isn't so. I'll do anything you ask! I'll name my first child Jesus, just as you want, but let me be pregnant after Joseph and I have sex! I'll even seduce Joseph right away! Just don't make me pregnant before then!" But according to Luke the angel didn't repeat, "Do not be afraid." Instead, the angel told her that it will be the Holy Spirit who would impregnate her, that the child would be called "Son of God," and that by the way, her aged kinswoman Elizabeth who had been barren was now six months pregnant after all these years of praying to God for a child.

Luke has Mary replying, "Here am I. I am the Lord's servant; as you have spoken, let it be so." What courage that took! These are the words used by the faithful people of God throughout the Bible whenever they knew that they were being called by God to something far greater than themselves. In that moment Mary was like Abraham, like Moses, like Elijah. The angel left and then Mary traveled at least 60 miles away to see her relative Elizabeth. It is interesting to speculate why she did this. Perhaps she didn't quite believe the angel and she wanted to verify that Elizabeth was truly pregnant. Perhaps she thought Elizabeth could help her interpret the angel's message. Perhaps she thought the difficulty of the journey might induce a miscarriage, or perhaps she could give up the child for adoption if she wasn't anywhere near Nazareth.

That's all back story for this week's gospel. Luke's gospel tells us that

Elizabeth's pregnancy was confirmed when Mary saw her and the Holy Spirit clued Elizabeth into Mary's pregnancy. And Mary spoke the *Magnificat*, which we heard as the prelude today, sung in Latin. Mary's words echo the words of Hannah, whose story we heard several weeks ago, and whose barrenness Elizabeth's barrenness recalls. Hannah's son was Samuel, the last of the judges and the first of the prophets, who anointed Israel's first two kings, Saul and David. Elizabeth's son was John, a prophet who baptized Jesus, the new "king" to be. And Mary's words also call to mind the words of another Mary, the sister of Aaron, who after Pharaoh's army drowned while pursuing Moses and the Children of Israel, with the chant, "Sing to the LORD, for he has risen up in triumph; the horse and his rider he has hurled into the sea."

Many a mother to be offers prayers of thanks to God during her pregnancy. But how many pregnant women would offer a prayer of thanks to God under the circumstances in which Mary found herself? How many such women would thank God using Luke's language:

God's arm has performed mighty deeds;

God has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

God has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

God has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty,

when everywhere they looked there was abundant proof that God had not done any such things for a very long time and there was little evidence that God would do so anytime soon? It had been 175 years since God had performed mighty deeds, the Maccabean revolt that led to self-rule under the Hasmonean dynasty. Nor had rulers been brought down from their thrones; King Herod the Great ruled the Holy Land under the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. The humble had not been lifted up, the hungry were still hungry and the rich were still there. Yet Mary's prayer was of gratitude and praise and, above all, of hope.

I could stop there, but there is a larger story. Luke was a companion of Paul and wrote his gospel sometime in the years between 70 and 85 CE; that is, at least 40 years after Jesus died, so 70 years after Jesus' birth it is highly unlikely that he ever met Mary. We have no evidence that there was a written account of her pregnancy that circulated in the early Church. Why then did Luke include the

narrative of Mary's pregnancy and Jesus' infancy in his gospel? It is likely that he had two purposes in mind. One was to establish the link between Jesus and John the Baptist, since John's followers seemed to have been absorbed into the Christian movement and because Jews would have expected that the Messiah's arrival had been foretold by a prophet. The other purpose was to support the Church's early conviction that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. This was in contrast to the heretical Gnostics' belief that he was fully divine and not human and in contrast to the understandable Jewish belief that Jesus was fully human but not divine. Thus, Luke wrote a narrative to clarify that Jesus was born to a woman, and not just any woman but to a virgin, and his father was identified as the Holy Spirit rather than Joseph.

But why did Luke include Mary's prayer? By the time Luke wrote his gospel King Herod Antipas in Galilee had been accused of conspiracy against Rome and the emperor Caligula exiled him to Gaul (France) where he died. Pontius Pilate had been recalled to Rome because of his brutal suppression of a rebellion in Samaria. Supposedly Caligula also exiled him to Gaul, where he died. So, yes, God had performed mighty deeds and yes, some rulers had been deposed, but still there was despair. The emperor Nero had martyred Peter and Paul. When the Jews had revolted in 66 CE, the pro-Roman king and prominent Roman citizens fled Jerusalem as civil war between Jews who were revolutionaries and those who sought a diplomatic resolution. As could be expected, in response the Roman legions totally destroyed the Temple, much of Jerusalem and the other cities and towns in Palestine. More than a million Jews had been killed or died of famine and more than a hundred thousand Jews had been enslaved or had become refugees. The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and Galilee either died or, according to some old traditions, fled across the Jordan River. The Holy Land was decimated, the humble had not been lifted up, the hungry were still hungry and the rich were still there.

Have things changed all that much? There is no peace between Israel and its neighbors and internally between Jews and Palestinians. There is war between ISIS and countries in the Middle East and terrorists around the world are in thrall to a radical violent version of Islam, the religion of peace. Dictators still rule over too many African and Asian countries. Far too many homeless people live on the streets of our cities and income inequality continues to grow. The "have" nations have reached none of their laudable goals to help the people who live in "have not" nations. Diseases such as the Ebola virus and SARS and drug resistant bacteria can

now spread almost instantly across the globe. The Republican Party presidential candidates rush to xenophobia and racism and religiously bigotry, drawing the circle of “us” ever more narrowly.

And yet Mary and the Christians of Luke’s time had had hope. Luke’s gospel was a history of Jesus, his teachings, and how the Christian Church started, written to someone named Theophilus but also to his fellow Christians to sustain their hope. More than 2,000 years later do we need to hear the angel say, “Do not be afraid?” YES! Does our hope need sustaining? YOU KNOW IT DOES.

What is that hope? In *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*, Doris Donnelly^[ii] has noted that hope is like a middle child with faith and charity as her two more popular sisters. She wrote that hope is invisible, ignored, and frequently misunderstood. Let me give you some examples. According to Donnelly, “Hope is not wishy-washy, nor is she comfortable with doubt.” (Is it going to be warm today? I hope so.) “It’s not hopelessness.” (The only thing left for us to do is hope.) “It’s not frivolous.” (I hope our team wins today.) “It is not the same as optimism.” (As Scarlet O’Hara used to say, ‘Tomorrow is another day.’)

In that same issue of *Weavings*, Michael Downey^[iii] says that

Hope is precisely what we have when we do not have something...It is the certainty that something makes sense, is worth the cost, regardless of how it might turn out. Hope is a sense of what might yet be. It strains ahead, seeking a way behind and beyond every obstacle...It is precisely when faith crumbles and love grows dim that hope really begins; it is in the wonder and weakness of our faith that we find its real meaning. Hope is the willingness not to give up precisely when we draw no consolation from faith. It doesn’t try to determine how God’s ways will be shown, but remains open to new and astonishing manifestations of the divine presence. Hope is the retrieval of possibilities that come as gift. It allows something to come into life that is not self-generated.

Donnelly notes that

Hope does not disappoint because God is our hope and it is the nature of God to honor commitments, to lead us through the valley of darkness. Christian hope, quite simply, is based on the undeviating reliability of

God.

Downey adds that the reason for our hope is the Incarnation. It's not just that God has entered human life and history in Christ. It's that we can enter the life of God and incarnation continues. It is God's constant giving, so that we can find God

...amidst our feeding, washing, weeping, celebrating, listening, silence, traveling, teaching, working, growing, visiting, enjoying a good meal, resting, feeling pain, brokenness, and vulnerability, and healing.

Precisely there, among us always.

And, Downey says, it is especially in our brokenness and vulnerability that we come to experience God the deepest, for it was in God's self-emptying in Christ's life, passion, and crucifixion that gives us the reason for our hope. As Downey says, "When we are at our darkest hour, bereft of the consolation that even faith brings, Christ is there – unto death and into hell, where the power of love will prevail over all evil."

The Incarnation is coming. The Incarnation has come. The Incarnation is always here. And so, like Mary, we can say

My soul glorifies the Lord

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for God has been mindful

of the humble state of God's servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is the Lord's name.

The Lord's mercy extends to those who follow God,

from generation to generation.

God's arm has performed mighty deeds;

God has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

God has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

God has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

God has helped servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

to Abraham and his descendants forever,

just as God promised our ancestors.

AMEN.

[\[i\]](#) Cohick, Lynn H. *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life*. Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.

[\[ii\]](#) Donnelly, Doris. "The Season of Hope," in Mogabgab, John S. (ed.) *Weavings*, vol. XIV, No. 6, November/December 1999, pp. 15-21.

[\[iii\]](#) Downey, Michael. "Gift's Constant Coming," *Ibid*, pp. 24-32