

“The Inn – A Room with a View (LOVE)”

December 19, 2021

The Inn: Housing the Holy series

We’ve journeyed through this Advent season, and we’ve heard from prophets - Jeremiah, Baruch, Isaiah, and John the Baptist. Today we hear from Micah, named a prophet in the Old Testament, and we also hear from Mary. Now some might not call Mary a prophet, but she is. She stands in line with the prophets of old - prophets whose words she knew as a young Jewish woman, prophets who promised the coming of the Messiah, prophets who tell God’s story - even when it’s tough to share.

I really wish that we had a little more to go on from Mary. The conversation speeds along. The angel comes and announces that Mary will bear a child. She says “yes.” She goes to visit Elizabeth, her cousin, who affirms that the child Mary carries is indeed the Lord, and then Mary sings this powerful song. We have to read Matthew if you want Joseph’s side of the story, and maybe we wonder how it all went once Mary was in the thick of labor. **SLIDE** - Silent Night meme

Luke gives us the pre-birth story told through the voices of women (Elizabeth and Mary) along with Zechariah once he can speak again. It’s women - older Elizabeth, who thought she wouldn’t bear a child, and younger Mary, whose life takes a very unexpected turn - who give a clear message about how God is at work in amazing ways.

And make no mistake - Mary’s song isn’t just a song. Mary isn’t meek and mild at all, and neither is her song. Like all of Israel, she’s been waiting for God to show up, and she sings in response to the promise being fulfilled. She and Elizabeth share this special moment, and it’s almost like a call and response. Mary’s song is full of vulnerability and joy. It’s a prophetic word about who Jesus is and what he will do - and how God will bring hope, help, and justice, especially to those who haven’t experienced it.

Micah speaks to Israel in a time when Jerusalem is under siege and hope is dim. Micah proclaims God’s intention to restore and renew the people. It will happen, but these promises will be fulfilled in an unexpected way, from an unlikely place – the small city of Bethlehem - about six miles away where most of the working-class people lived. And it will happen in an unlikely way – in a child who will shepherd the people and bring peace.

If people had their eyes on the big city, Jerusalem, as the place where God would bring a ruler, they needed to look around - even to the small town on Bethlehem. God was preparing a way for salvation in a place people weren’t looking - even a place they disregarded. Bethlehem would be the place where Love Incarnate would be born and where the One who came to save the world would come on the scene.

We've been preparing to house the Holy One of God in Advent - making room, making space, sharing what we have, and now the challenge is from Mary, the mother of Jesus - to see ourselves as a place where Love can reside, where Love can find a home and then be shared with everyone, and especially with those who may not know Love. Mary's song is a witness from a voice might that not be the first listened to, but it's a voice we can't deny. She's telling us God's story - and it's not what we expected at all. God is doing something new here - and she's a part of it.

Mary sings after the angel's visit when she's called by God to bear the Christ-child and says "yes" to God, after she receives the affirmation and encouragement from Elizabeth. Mary sings a song of praise to God, but it's deeper than that. She sings a song of joy because of how good God is, but she also sings a song of justice for what God will do through her, in her life, and for the world - because of Jesus.

Just like John's preaching called for radical social change, so Mary says that the world will be turned upside-down because of the Christ-child. God will make a way for the lowly to be lifted up, for the hungry to be fed, for mercy to reign - and she is a part of how God is moving in the world! This is the view of the Kingdom of God from where Mary is.

But let's be honest: it's hard to hear that Jesus will turn the social order upside-down because I'm pretty comfortable where I am. If that's what Jesus does, and we want to follow him, then what? It's easy to think that Mary's song is about other people - the proud, those in power, the rich. But what if it's about us?

We struggle with pride - that notion that we're good on our own. We don't need God or anyone else. "I" and "me" are the center of everything. We want recognition and attention. Pride is a swelled head and a swelled heart, and our worship can easily move away from God and onto ourselves, or other people, or other things. Mary calls us back to humility.

And if you're ready to get really uncomfortable, we can talk about being rich. Though we may not likely feel rich today, we're rich according to every standard in the world. Researchers tell us that many Americans who are classified as "poor" by our country's standards would fall into a middle income category globally. Now poverty is real, and we're called to respond in every way that we can, but perspective matters if we're talking about Mary's song, especially as it speaks to us.

Mary's song sings right to us and convicts us. Mary's song is powerful enough that the public reading and display of it has been banned in some places: in Guatemala during the 1980's, in Argentina during the Dirty War when mothers whose children had gone missing posted the words for everyone to see, and even in India under British colonial rule. Mary's song has affected the theology of many around the world who

have found themselves as the humble under someone else's rule.

Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached these words in Advent 1933. Know that Bonhoeffer spoke out against the Nazis and was killed in 1945. But he offered this in 1933: "The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary's mouth."

Mary calls us to claim a new story - a new way that God is working. I can only imagine how many people would have dismissed her and discounted her story. Every year, we're confronted with the reality that if Jesus' birth story was happening in real time, in our time, we might find ourselves skeptical of a young woman, pregnant, unmarried, claiming to be the one whom God called to bear the Son of God.

Mary's part in God's story should give us a sense that God works in ways we do not understand or even appreciate. Haven't we been surprised how God works sometimes? God chooses to come to and call the most vulnerable - a young girl with no power of her own. God chooses to come as a child - the most vulnerable and powerless. And that sets the stage for God who will work - not by wielding power and might - but by showing humility and love that transforms the world. So today we're challenged to reject earthly power and its draw - and to seek deeper humility.

This child in her womb - the Son of God - will go up against the expectations of the rich, the proud, and the powerful. This child will show God's love for the poor, the meek, and the most vulnerable. Mary is an expectant mother, but she's so much more. She is a messenger of God's good news. She is a prophet who speaks God's truth to those who need to hear it - and probably to those who don't want to hear it. We may not want to hear it. Maybe we'd rather sing the beloved carols, but we need to hear this song, too.

Mary tells us that God holds a special place for those who are not powerful, not proud, or not prosperous. We hold different opinions about economic inequalities and how to address them most effectively. But Mary sings about what Jesus will do, and though I know that Jesus' power cannot be contained, I also know that God calls us to work for the Kingdom of God every day.

Mary says that God cares about those who are humble and hungry. God cares

about those who are oppressed. God cares, and we have a responsibility to care without judgment and to offer compassion and mercy. That goes against the way of the world. It means that we make sacrifices for others and that we're courageous and convicted in why we love and serve - because we follow a Savior who reaches out to the least, last, and lost - whose power is not oppressive, but whose power is Love - life-giving and sustaining grace.

Mary also sings that God will do great things, even through her! She claims the call on her life - not in a self-righteous way - but in a God-glorifying way! *My soul gives glory to God; my heart calls out God's praise...*

How can our witness of God's greatness show through us and be told through us? Mary is clear that God will lift her up. It's not that God will make her better than anyone else, but Mary calls us to be humble - to understand who we are and who God is - to come to God in prayer and worship with an open heart and a humble spirit that calls us to remember that we're all in this together - and that Jesus is in it with us.

And so, as we prepare our hearts to welcome Jesus, that's our view from this space as Mary sings it - this view of preparing a place for Love to reside, to let him reside in us, and to share Jesus - Love Incarnate - with the world. That's the call and challenge of Mary's song.

May God help us to be God-bearers.

Let us pray...