

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year Ci – December 20, 2015
Micah 5:2-5a; Canticle 15 (Song of Mary, Luke 1:46-55) or Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews
10:5-10; and Luke 1:39-55
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Magnificat...you were expecting just an innocent baby?

On the first Sunday of Advent we journeyed toward Bethlehem with the hot apocalyptic writing of Scripture in preparation for the earth-shattering event of the birth of God in human form, marking the beginning of God's final acts of repairing this fractured world and restoring human hearts into right relationship with one another and with God. On the second and third Sundays of Advent we came closer to the Annunciation of the coming of Christ through the *denunciation* proclaimed by John the Baptist – clean up your act and prepare the way of the Lord, in your hearts and minds and actions. So, on the first three Sundays in Advent we met with the tempest of Apocalyptic scenes and the fire of John's denunciations. We now arrive at the fourth Sunday of Advent and encounter Mary and her annunciation and some reassurance and calm serenity, which we think of when we encounter her, the god-bearer, the Mother of our Lord...right? Well hold on to your hats as we now journey with Mary! For today's reading from Luke's gospel recounts a visit made by Mary to her older cousin and friend Elizabeth. We do not find here a docile, domesticated and dull girl with a vacant stare as is often portrayed by many statues of Mary. Nor do we see the blue veil, the slouching posture, the downcast eyes, the halo, nor the insecure demeanor that we find in holy card pictures or in many paintings of Mary.ⁱⁱ Instead, we catch a glimpse of someone else, someone free from the encrustations that the traditions have put on her. When I read this little episode, I see a tough young woman who knew safety was an illusion, one who was aware of the world around her and very shrewd, and one who was alive to God's surprises and to the tragic—one who wept, who laughed and who chose life every inch of the way. I see a model of Christian maturity and commitment, plain and simple.

Here is a pregnant woman, remember, who took a strenuous trip to visit her cousin. A far cry from today where some overprotective friend or doctor might say that such a trip to visit Elizabeth in Judah's hill country—a good 60-mile walk—would have been too risky, too bumpy, too far. Even more so for the plans to travel to Bethlehem, a full 90-mile trek over very rough terrain. Life was too short, and God's voice too strong in her, to live by the motto "safety first."

We see not only vigorous women in this scene, but we also see astute and utterly aware people. We see an openness in them that enables them to literally bear the Gospel in their hearts and in their wombs. We see a joyfulness in their conversation that is an infallible sign of the presence of God. And, not only are they models of openness and joy, but also of responsiveness and responsibility. Mary sings the most radical song in the Bible during her visit with Elizabeth. Her song of praise—the Magnificat, as it's known—is the prayer of the woman Hannah found in the first book of Samuel (2:1-10). It is the song of the three-fold proclamation—or Manifesto, if you will—that will define her son's kingdom and her place within it. First, Spiritual: "He has shown strength with his arm; he

has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.” Second, Political: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.” And third, Economic: “He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

And so, Mary is the first of the disciples to prophetically foretell the Messianic judgment on the haughty, the enthroned, and the full, and the Messianic blessing on the humble, the oppressed and the hungry. She speaks out the purposes of Christ, who the Book of Acts describes as the one who “turned the world upside down.” Although we’ve programmed most surprises out of this season, that is one surprise of Christmas that sneaks back in—the surprise of the great reversal where God in Christ will cut down arrogant people of power, and offer to the powerless a future and a hope. Mary’s Magnificat still hits a bit too close to home, and surprises us by telling us that Christmas is not about getting what we want, but about God who both gives and gets what God wants, namely the good news of the God who becomes and lives and dies as one of us, and who both comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. Beware, you powerful! Hope, and rejoice, you powerless! This is the real surprise of Christmas. The Annunciation in and through Mary thus carries with it the Denunciation by John the Baptist whom we’ve encountered over the past couple of weeks. Pretty surprising and yes, radical, stuff coming from the mouth of a humble young maiden. This foretelling of upheaval and reversal was for the sake of God’s love for His whole creation—a love Mary knew, a painful love she would soon know.

Mary engaged in the same responsibility that she sang about—this she did throughout her son’s life. If there is any traditional pose that we might find most possible to comprehend the real Mary, it would be in the Pieta, depicting Mary and Jesus at the end of his life—portrayed by Michelangelo and others through the centuries. With some help from Catholic theologian, Doris Donnelly, let’s look at this image of the Pieta:

“Jesus is dead, his cause an apparent failure, and Mary, who was once able to save her son by fleeing to Egypt, is powerless to save him now. We need to contemplate this densely packed human moment—to stop, to care, to wonder—as it commemorates a crumbling world for Mary. She has lost a son. They have lost their cause. It is finished.

Yet, in this potentially macabre setting, death insists, as it [often] does, on its right to be intimate, and Mary pleads for that privilege here. [Yet], in a courageous gesture, Mary does not veil the pathos from our eyes, nor does she camouflage the circumstances of the execution. Jesus lies sprawled across her lap, and, with arms outstretched, Mary offers him to us all. It is in some ways an unexpected and uncharacteristic pose; would it not be more likely for [a] mother to cradle her dead son in her arms and caress him to her bosom?”ⁱⁱⁱ

But no; Mary’s grieving is an open-armed gesture, an open-armed gesture replicated in scenes that accompany other absurd tragedies: be it the wailing of mothers after the slaughter of the innocents by Herod that we remember in the Christmas story itself, or the more contemporary scene of a bereft Syrian mother running through the bombed and

burning streets of Aleppo with the charred body of her son outstretched and offered to a culpable world in a moment of unbridled and unassuaged agony; or the South Sudanese mother gently washing the fiberless ribs of her 12-year old daughter who had been raped before being bayoneted and murdered; or the mother in any of our American cities who kneels with her arms raised to heaven and to us while her dead child lies in a pool of blood having been shot by a random bullet in front of his own home. Like Mary, these women need their grief to be public: they refuse to shield the atrocities from us or to render the victims anonymous.

I know several mothers from a previous parish who travelled many miles to visit the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. One mother expressed the reason for her trip and her need to touch her son's name, engraved among the thousands of other names of the dead. "It was", she said, "because war is names and not numbers." This mother knew the same thing that the mothers from Palestine, Aleppo, South Sudan, or any of our cities knew. They all knew what the *Pieta* expresses: that killing is flesh, and that death has a face—the face of a brother, mother, father, sister, daughter, husband, wife or son.

Professor Donnelly concludes that,

"In the end, this may well be the *Pieta's* strongest and most enduring insight for us—that distance, not death, is the enemy of intimacy. And Mary's most important struggle on behalf of [God's purposes] may be her refusal to allow death to have the final word. Mary bridges distance by picking up the cause for which her son was killed. And she [made] it known early that she will not be bullied into fear and shame by the powers that be. Steadfast and resolute during her son's agony, Mary invites us, as we behold the limp and dangling body of her son, to meet a person, the peacemaker from Galilee...who preached a gospel of compassion and forgiveness."^{iv}

In that meeting we may glimpse the mystery of who the Word of God is who became flesh and dwelt among us. Perhaps the Mary we see with Elizabeth at the beginning, and the Mary we see in the *Pieta* at the end, believes that such a meeting could transform our perceptions to prevent further tragic scenes of God's sons and daughters lying limp in their mothers' arms. Then enemies' and strangers' sons and daughters will also have a name and face, and bear a resemblance to a family that is one and the same.

ⁱ See also The Visitation – May 31; St. Mary the Virgin – August 15

ⁱⁱ Traditional words that have been used to describe Mary—such as “handmaiden” or “submissive” or “obedient” or “meek and mild”—just don't fit the young woman we see in today's gospel reading.

ⁱⁱⁱ [= my additions to her quotes] Doris Donnelly, “Maternity's Raw Faith: The Courage of Mary” in Sojourners Magazine (Washington DC: Sojourners Fellowship, November 1983)

^{iv} Donnelly, *Ibid.*