

December 15, 2019

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Reading: Luke 1:46-55

The Message: An Overflowing Blessing

It takes a great deal of faith, as days grow shorter and nights grow longer, as a year ends in which we have experienced loss and another begins, in that time between, to proclaim the presence and reign of God.

It takes a great deal of hope to be able to be honest about our situation in exile. So we gather in Advent and sing hymns of honest yearning.

Do you know the most often appearing sentence in the bible? "Do not fear!" The bible is a library of hundreds of stories. Every form of literature is present in the bible from history to suspense, from poetry to adventure stories, from song lyrics to erotica. But the bible could also be divided into four volumes named The Books of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love, because these themes run through all those stories.

How can I say that when so many of these stories are about the darkness, about the defeat, about the grief of loss?

Because

- even when folk are railing against God with clenched fist -- or pleading with God for relief, people are expressing an honest hope that someone is listening.
- When there is no peace, we can turn to stories of lions lying down with lambs, with swords being beaten into plowshares.
- When people are despairing, there is the promise of joy coming in the morning.
- And over and over again there are stories, prophecies, parables and poems extolling God's love for us children.

We can be honest and tell the truth about our condition because

- We can 'see' ourselves in all our complexities in the stories of scripture.
- We believe that God has made our situation God's.
- We believe in a God who yearns to be near us, to come to us, to save us no matter what condition God finds us in.

We have hope because we read of a continuing relationship with God; a relationship that is never broken. Often that is because we experience God in others, just like in the bible.

"Sometimes our light goes out but is blown into flame by another human being. Each of us owes deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this light."

Albert Schweitzer

'Do not fear' Mary hears. And she hears the angel in the context of scripture that has been passed down the generations. How do we know that she is well versed in the Hebrew texts? Because she quotes from them -- so much that some have argued that the Magnificat is a patchwork-- phrases from the Hebrew scriptures stitched together. But it is much more: it's a theological interpretation of Hebrew scripture -- Mary develops a theology of the poor, invitation to praise, joy, and gladness at the salvation of Jerusalem.

Nowhere in my research have I seen lifted up which must be an important truth: Mary knew her scriptures well. Not just by rote. She understood them, she drew themes out of the totality of scripture; she interpreted them for others. She was a teacher who could tell stories that would help others to understand better.

How can I possibly say that when there is so little evidence of that in the Christian scriptures? Easy. Because Jesus knew his scriptures. Yes, he may have gone to the temple every year at Passover and questioned the priests and scribes. But once a year would not have given him the intimate, deep, reflective knowledge of scripture that he had.

His father checked out early -- we never hear of him outside of the birth story and one passing reference to him at the time of Jesus' baptism.

Mary is not only present but persists -- through a wine shortage at the wedding at Cana to the foot of the cross. No airy fairy theologian consumed with how many angels can fit on a pin. Mary was a practical theologian. I know, because for four years, I was the practical theologian at Queen's Theological College. My job was to take all that academic learning and helped students to apply what they learned to the nitty gritty of pastoral ministry. Mary was the practical theologian who could look at the world, see it as it was, and point to how God was doing a new thing: overturning the world order, minimizing the power of the oppressor and lifting up the poor.

And if she could sing this canticle, there really isn't any excuse for us not to hope that peace, joy and love can be ours this Christmas time.

She figured out that Jesus would show us how to move through suffering and death -- would go before us, to prepare the way for us.

And perhaps the most important reason we have for hope is the relationship between God and Jesus through Mary. God grieved for Jesus, just as we grieve for those we watch suffer and die. God grieved. God wept. But God carried on loving the world that killed him, kept on working in people's lives, and kept Jesus alive in the world to remind us we are a forgiven, hopeful people.

We have Jesus; we have resurrection; we have forgiveness and redemption; we have God's presence with us -- all because Mary was the most practical of theologians.

So this Advent, I proclaim to you, 'Fear not! Your God reigns. Our God comes to us, Immanuel, God with us.

Therefore we hope for peace, joy and love. We are not alone.