



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: December 20, 2009

This Season's True Song, Robert B. Culp

Micah 5: 2-5a; Luke 1: 39-55

A few years ago, a story appeared on the internet about a bride-to-be who found out that her fiancé had been carrying on with another woman, with this discovery taking place just six weeks before her wedding date. The evidence was irrefutable and heartbreaking for the bride, and so, after much discussion (but, of course, without any “Tiger Woods-like pre-nup”), she called off the wedding two weeks before it was scheduled. But she did not call off the reception.

The bride and her mother found out that they could cancel the band, the flowers, and the photographer, but they would still be responsible for the huge bill for a four-course dinner for 125 people. So the bride decided, in her own words, “to turn this into something positive.” She rearranged the guest list by removing the names of all the men (no big surprise there!), and she turned the reception into a “women-only benefit” for two charities – one to help poor children in her home state of Vermont, and the other to empower women in developing countries. Instead of bringing wedding gifts, the invited guests wrote checks.

And Mary said, **“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.”**

Now, those wedding guests who had once expected a grand and luxurious wedding reception did leave the party with their purses a little lighter and their bank accounts a little depleted, but I doubt that any of them left with empty hearts. For with their checks written, the hungry and hurting were going to be filled with good things. To be sure, this bride did not get to wear her wedding dress, and didn't get to feed her husband the wedding cake, and didn't get to throw her bouquet. But she did get to go on her honeymoon to Tahiti ... and she took her mom!

When I read this story, my heart was warmed, and I felt great respect and admiration for this woman's spunk and vision. In some sense, she reminded me of Mary, faced too with a radical change in plans, but who was unwilling to be undone by it. When her own situation might have overwhelmed her, she turned her attention to the poor and hungry and to a hurting world in a poetic fashion. By turning her own feelings of disappointment into an occasion for generosity, this bride was a woman who turned her tears into a wondrous song accented by laughter ... for she could not keep from singing.

For many centuries the Christian church, particularly the branch of the church nurtured in Rome, has used this story from Luke to create a kind of cult around the figure of Mary. There are some positive dimensions to such veneration, especially in regard to the feminine energy that is very much a part of our faith's sacred narrative. But if we focus only upon Mary, I think we may miss the point of Luke's story. For the Annunciation is primarily a story about God

– about God’s initiative within the human scene, about God’s startling and unexpected grace, about God’s unpredictable power and love within human life.

Indeed, the Annunciation is one more variation on a rather consistent theme that is woven throughout the Bible – namely, that our God does holy work in very ordinary ways ... and that our God somehow chooses to be particular, even somewhat peculiar, but above all, quite personal in bringing forth abundant life amidst our everyday world. Simply consider our faith’s sacred story:

- * an old couple, long past the age of raising a family, is chosen by God and promised that their descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky;
- * a ragtag, motley group of Hebrew slaves is liberated from the chains of captivity for the purpose of holy living within the world;
- * a reluctant, tongue-tied murderer named Moses is challenged to become the greatest liberator of all time;
- * vine-dressers, temple assistants, and unsuspecting farmers get catapulted into prophetic leadership;
- * old women conceive babies, young women become mysteriously pregnant, polished professionals are shaken up by strange dreams and are knocked off their horses by a blinding light.

Again and again, God takes common, imperfect clay and shapes it into memorable vessels that are put to use for holy purposes.

A writer tells the story of a colleague who serves several small churches in northeastern Pennsylvania, with these congregations having been shaped within the crucible of the drudgery of coal-mining. This modern-day circuit rider spends a great deal of his time serving communion in the simple, sparsely-furnished homes of his discouraged parishioners – bringing into their hard and stress-filled lives the simple gifts of God’s exquisite grace.

At one point, in the beginning year of his ministry there, this pastor decided to stop by the county dump, and he collected some bits and pieces of trash. Being a skilled craftsman, he took this garbage home and fashioned it into a chalice and a plate to be used in his home communion services. According to the writer ...

“He would sit around the kitchen table with the people the world had discarded, and over and over again would tell them the same thing. He told them the history of the chalice and the plate, and then he would explain that this is what God is in the business of doing. Somehow, God takes lives that seem useless, broken, and have been thrown away, and then makes them over into vessels of beauty – vessels through which God can minister to the world.”

Can you see that this lies at the heart of the Christian story? Again and again and again – to Moses and Deborah, to Isaiah and Amos, to Mary and Joseph, to you and to me, God comes – with particular, peculiar, and personal grace – to fashion holy work and holy purpose out of our tattered and tarnished lives. As one author puts it, “The Annunciation is first and foremost a story about God, a God who makes something out of nothing, a God who fashions somewhere out of nowhere, a God who creates somebody out of nobody. And the punch line of this tale is delivered by the angel Gabriel who declares that ‘... nothing will be impossible with God.’”

Of course, for Mary and Joseph there would be no grand wedding with a four-course dinner for 125 people. Instead, there would be a difficult journey to Bethlehem for the couple, with Joseph on his way there to be registered. They lived in an age of political repression that would make the McCarthy era in our country back in the 50’s look gentle and tame. Their country of Israel was occupied by the super power of the day, the Roman Empire. And when the Emperor called you to register yourself, for the purposes of taxation without representation, you did it because you had no choice.

Mary responds from that “virgin place” (as Thomas Merton calls it), that “point untouched by human illusion, that place of pure truth ... which belongs entirely to God, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will, that place which is the pure glory of God in us.” Mary is filled with a childlike awe, and she ponders. And her pondering leads to a wondrous resolve. Reminded of all that God has done in the past within

the sacred narrative woven into her life, and convinced by Gabriel's promise that God will be with her in the days ahead, Mary says "Yes." She decides to trust God with her future, with her soul, with her life ... even though she does not know where it will lead or what the future may hold (which is the essence of faith itself).

Mary's "Yes," based on trust, brings her great joy ... so much so that she breaks out singing: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and Holy is God's name." Mary – ordinary, peasant-girl Mary – has become the "Favored One." And the good news here is that this is also true for each of us, for we, too, are called "favored" in the eyes of God.

For, though this sacred drama is primarily about God, with Mary as the leading lady, the script also includes each one of us. Mary's ordinary humanity, Mary's surprise, Mary's pause to ponder, Mary's transforming trust, and Mary's faithful decision to throw herself into the mystery of God's love – all of this is a gracious template for our own Christian discipleship. And Mary's song reveals the startling truth of a new world struggling to be born ... not only in our own time, but also in our own lives.

In the midst of her own pain and fear and limited choices in life, Mary realized that she did have one choice. She could cry, or she could sing. And such is Mary's blessing to us ... she couldn't keep from singing. Her song is a revolutionary song telling of a very strange and unpredictable, but unbelievably loving God – a God who overturns the way the world works, who elects the least and the last to bring in the kingdom, a God whose judgment in every sense will save the poor, the wronged, and the oppressed.

It's a revolutionary future where the long-ago memories of failing minds are honored as if they were priceless gifts; where Jews and Muslims and Christians and other faith adherents open their homes to one another instead of plotting others' destruction; where parents of murdered Amish children care for the family of the murderer instead of calling for his head; where swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. What an extraordinary song Mary sings. And it is our song to sing, too. Indeed, it is this season's true song.