

## WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT BLOWS THROUGH

Luke 1: 26-56

Autumn Peltier is an Anishinaabe water-rights advocate with an international reputation. Autumn is 17 years old. At the age of 8, she attended a ceremony at Serpent River First Nation in Ontario with her mother. There, she saw signs that warned of “toxic” drinking water. Contaminated water on reserves throughout Canada caused by a variety of factors including pollution and pipeline leaks has been an ongoing problem. Her mother explained that Serpent River had been on a boiled-water advisory for over 10 years. Autumn was shocked. Her mother and grandmother had been involved for years in clean water advocacy. That day, Autumn was awakened to her own vocation as an advocate and activist. In time, Autumn developed her voice as a spokesperson, addressing the issue in the Canadian parliament and the United Nations. Her advocacy began with a focus on the state of indigenous reserves across Canada. But soon, she was collaborating at a global level, speaking at conferences on behalf of the rights of peoples in many parts of the world in need of clean drinking water. Already at 17, Autumn has won many awards and recognitions and this is only the beginning of where she has yet to go. She is empowered and on fire. How can this be?

Before we address this question, let me tell you about a few more young women:

Greta Thunberg is an 18-year-old Swedish environmental activist who is well known for challenging world leaders to take immediate action to address our climate crisis. She has a global voice and leads a now global movement. She and others were front and centre at the recent global climate change summit in Glasgow, Scotland. Greta’s activism began when she persuaded her parents to adopt lifestyle choices that reduced their own carbon footprint. At the age of 15, she started spending her school days outside the Swedish parliament to call for

stronger action on climate change by holding up a sign reading: "School Strike for Climate." Soon other students engaged in similar protests in their own communities. After Thunberg addressed the 2018 United Nations Climate Change Conference, student strikes took place every week somewhere in the world. In 2019, there were multiple coordinated multi-city protests involving over a million students each. To avoid carbon-intensive flying, Thunberg sailed in a yacht to North America, where she attended the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit. There she gave a powerful, fiery speech where she denounced world leaders for their complacency. Her swift rise to fame has made her a target of hateful criticism as much as she is also an inspiration to many young and old. And this is only the beginning for Thunberg. How can this be?

Well, then there's Malala Yousafzai. At 24 years of age, Malala is a global human rights advocate and activist from Pakistan focussed especially on education for women and girls, and especially in parts of the world where access to such education is difficult if not altogether banned. The daughter of an educational activist, Malala was engaged in the promotion of education for girls from early in her life. She wrote about it and as an adolescent received world-wide attention. Attention, however, also invited threats, especially from militant groups who vehemently opposed her work. At the age of 12, while on a bus after an exam, Malala and two other girls were shot by a gunman in an assassination attempt in retaliation for her activism. Malala was shot in the head and remained unconscious and in critical condition for months. Remarkably and miraculously she survived and after repeated surgeries, recovered. And rather than go into hiding or temper her activism, this experience only fired her up that much more to continue her activist work.

The youngest recipient of the Nobel peace prize and numerous other awards, as well as a special guest at many global conferences and political and educational institutions world-wide, Malala was also awarded honorary Canadian citizenship in 2017 and became the youngest person to address the Canadian parliament. And all this is just the beginning for Malala and her passionate vocation to

achieve greater justice, human rights and equality for all genders and races. How can this be?

Finally, there is another young woman, a teenager, one who lived a long time ago. Her name is Mary. Mary's parents are poor peasants. There is no school for Mary, and because she is a woman, she can't work outside the home either. There are clear social and cultural expectations for Mary if she is to make it in her world without bringing dishonour to her family. She has to marry the man chosen for her and she has to bear children. And yet, like Autumn, Greta and Malala, Mary, too, will become an instrument of the divine agitating for change in the world. "But how can this be?" says Mary to herself and to the angelic visitor. How can this be, given my reality? I am just a young woman in a world where women can do very little to change the world, and a poor peasant woman even less so.

Mary's world like our world today is one where there are vast gaps between rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless, men and women, some races over other races and dominant groups over those who are marginalized for any number of reasons. Yes, the world has changed for good in many places like here in Canada, and yet injustice is uncovered daily within our institutions, governments and colonial history. And just like other more prosperous nations of this planet, we are that much more abusive to our mother earth in our development and use of carbon emitting, earth destroying technology and lifestyle consumption.

And yet, Mary, like Autumn, Greta and Malala, somehow comes to believe change is possible, miracles are possible, that she is given a destiny to fulfill because God has called her. How can this be, given the overwhelming obstacles in her life and the realities of her world? Mary is told this: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you." In other words, God will blow through you like Spirit, like wind, like energy, and you will be fired up with a vision, a vision you will carry into your mothering of this child.

All your hopes and dreams will be fed into this child and he will become what you dream for him and for a world in need of greater justice and transformation. And in case Mary has her doubts about what's possible, she is told this: "And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has conceived a son... for nothing will be impossible with God." If you have doubts about what's possible for you and the child conceived in you, Mary, check out what's happening with your cousin Elizabeth. These are signs, signs that as much as the world tells you change is impossible, that greater justice is impossible, that you are stuck in the life you've got as a poor young woman in your world, don't believe it!

And what happens next? We're told that "Mary set out with haste to a Judean town in the hill country," to visit her cousin Elizabeth. We're told that when Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting the child in her womb "leaps for joy"! There is excitement and anticipation about what's possible when the Spirit blows through. Elizabeth will become the mother of John the Baptist as Mary will become the mother of Jesus. In their world, revolutionary transformation becomes possible through the sons they will raise and the vision they will feed them.

And what is Mary's vision exactly? She bares her soul to Elizabeth: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for God has looked with favour on the lowliness of God's servant which I am..." God has shown Mary a vision and given her a dream, a dream where those in power are brought down from their thrones of oppression, and those poor and downtrodden are raised up. It's a vision of justice and equality for a broken world where a few have everything and most have little to nothing. Jesus is not going to be raised in a vacuum. Unless the Spirit engages Mary in how she raises Jesus, Jesus himself cannot internalize a vision of what the Messiah must become. The Spirit blows through Mary and the same Spirit will blow through the child Mary will raise. Isn't this a fascinating re-reading of the Christmas story?

Mary is not just some passive vehicle for God to give birth to some divine human. No. The God of the bible has always risked working with vulnerable, everyday humans to shine some light in the darkness, to open up pathways of healing in a world broken and reconciliation in a world conflicted and hurting.

So then, if we take this story seriously as the story of a young, poor peasant girl who is awakened to a vision of what's possible for her in a world where she is told it's impossible, what's the message of Christmas? What does Autumn, Greta, Malala and Mary teach us if we see their work as the Spirit blowing through? It means we are called to something more than being mere passive consumers lulled into continuing a lifestyle of contaminating the earth and ignoring the social problems and needs around us. It means Christmas is a time to awaken to what we've been given our lives to be and do. It means that we need to find our joy and our passion in ever new ways of service in whatever time is given us left to live...

May this Christmas be a time of awakening, a time when new things become possible when the Spirit blows through, when new relationships are forged with other humans, other creatures and mother earth... The opportunities are there... Doors are opening... This season of Covid is a time of reckoning and rethinking much of everything... Come Holy Spirit come, blow through us this Christmas, and into the new year! Amen.