

## “BLESSED IS SHE WHO BELIEVED”

Luke 1: 39-56

What did Mary believe? And how did her faith “bless” her (as her cousin Elizabeth tells her)?

Let me tell a story. Early in my ministry in a former congregation I met a young woman. Here are the circumstances. Our church had non profit housing attached to it and we had a hall we shared for events. In the hall were couches lined up against the wall. One morning, the church administrator knocked on my office door. She had just gone into the hall for something and noticed someone sleeping on the couch. It was early morning and clearly the person had come into the hall the previous night sometime and slept there. I went in and we both, gently, woke the person up. It was a teenager. His name was Justin. We found out he had run away from home. He had a friend who lived in the building and his friend brought him into the hall so he had a place to sleep.

Anyhow, one thing led to another and we got the contact info for his mother. She was a single parent. She was upset and embarrassed. Justin was the middle child of three and was always getting himself into trouble. It was not the first time he had run away. His mom Jackie was at a loss how to support him. When she came to the church to collect Justin she sat down in my office and started crying. She told me her story. She had grown up in a home situation where she was constantly told she would never measure up. As a teenager she began to sabotage herself, getting into trouble in all kinds of ways. Eventually she also got pregnant, and predictably, with her low self-esteem, the partners she hooked up with were also abusive. Three children later and into her twenties, Jackie could not make enough money working and managing a household. Between burnout, a mental health breakdown and massive debt, she was stuck in a bad cycle within a welfare system she could never imagine getting out of.

And yet, I could see some fire in Jackie’s eyes. She had a passion and a desire for more in her life. I saw faith in her, faith in what was possible, if only the system, some organization or people could also believe in her enough to support her...

Anyhow, one thing led to another and the session of the congregation agreed to support Jackie. She registered for school and we paid her tuition as a gift. She was studying accounting and

finance. We also bought her a computer and paid for her textbooks. We also gave her gift cards for groceries and other necessities she needed just to manage some of the many needs of her household.

Even though Jackie was working, studying and parenting 24-7 the congregation embraced her and her family. Jackie finished her diplomas with top marks. Eventually, through one of our members with contacts in the insurance industry, she began working for the insurance bureau of Canada. Soon she was being promoted with a great salary and benefits because she was brilliant and driven in what she did. Over the years she not only paid off her debt, but also bought a small home. Her children were also doing better... Eventually she moved out of the area as she found other job opportunities. The children moved all over too as they became independent and with their own families. Over a 15 year period, amazing things happened for Jackie and the children.

This didn't mean Jackie didn't struggle still with her internal demons of self-doubt and that critical voice putting her down. We would go out for lunch regularly as we talked this stuff out. But nothing was going to stop her goals and ambitions.

Jackie expressed thanks to our congregation and to the session in different ways. Even as she looked back at the sorry state she had fallen into and felt embarrassed about it, she believed in herself and somehow in God, and she found in our church community the face of a God who believed in her.

And this, my friends, brings us to Mary in our gospel reading. Even though Mary is referred to in many places in the gospels, our scripture reading provides the one place where Mary expresses herself in more than a word or two. In fact, Mary's song, as it's been called, is beautiful poetry. Even though it's hard to know exactly where these poetic words came from originally, by being placed on Mary's lips it is telling us something about her heart and soul, and most importantly, her faith. What does Mary believe is happening to her and to her people through her? What does she (and Elizabeth, too) believe?

Well, they believe that through the children they are giving birth to, great things will happen for their people. This also tells us that if you want to understand the greatness of a John the Baptist or a Jesus, you have to go all the way back to their mothers. Like the great Moses who led the people out of slavery in Egypt of old, John the Baptist and Jesus will also be instrumental in opening a path of liberation for their people who are also in bondage. God will work through them to "scatter the proud in the thoughts of their hearts"... "bring down the mighty from their

thrones"... and "lift up the lowly". God will fill the hungry in body and spirit with good things, with faith, hope and a courageous love, and the rich who exploit them will be sent away empty... And why will God do this? Because this God is the God of the lowly and downtrodden, a God who is intent on reversing the unjust inequities and dominations that humans keep creating in the world... Mary believes that God's vision first through Moses and now through her child will be to inspire people again into rising up once more with a vision where there is enough for everyone, where generosity starves greed and compassion overcomes hate and indifference.

Wow! The traditional image of Mary meek and mild, a submissive young woman, a mere peasant girl accepting her fate in a world governed by men, a world where empires dominate local people and systems of oppression never change... This is not the Mary of this song! The courage of faith Mary bears witness to is one where God will create new pathways for the people, where transformation – personal and social, is not just a fine thought but a lived experience... God believes in Mary. Elizabeth believes in Mary. Mary now believes in herself and what's possible when God is activated in her. Wow! Awesome!

OK, but what happens? Does anything change? Has anything changed 2000 years later? Systems of domination have continued to create victims of people, animals and the earth. We're all caught in them, too, whether we are more the beneficiaries of the system or the victims. So how can Mary's faith provoke and inspire us?

Well, Mary's song is cuing us in. Pay attention to what happens to Elizabeth's child John and Mary's child Jesus. They will provoke and inspire transformation. However much or little the final outcome will be, and however much or little the transformation will stick, they point us to what life is truly about, especially as we approach Christmas. How will you and I find the faith and water such faith, a faith that will keep provoking and inspiring us to follow John and especially Jesus for whom John prepares the way, to keep renewing our journey of transformation? How will we be activated to love ever more deeply, fiercely, and justly in a world that swings back and forth from signs of hope to the same old same old systems of inequality and oppression leading us collectively downward? How will we make a difference in the life of even one other person because we follow the child of Mary and are inspired by her faith in what he will do?

Mary's song is not about some magical intervention from God in the clouds. It's about how God awakens people through faith and hope, to rise up in love and make a difference in the world. Whether the world changes in a significant way or not, this rising up is a sign and witness that God is alive and working, flowing through and moving as the wind and flame of the Spirit. Mary's

song is pointing us to our ultimate purpose as humans created by God: not to be consumers, caught in systems of unsustainability for our planet while the vulnerable starve, but humans called to give, serve and live so that more of the planet and its creatures have enough to live well...

Will this Christmas become more of a liberation for you, a simplifying, a getting some clarity, a clearing in your pathway, a new energy and resolve, some peace in letting go and learning better how to be, free to become?... Mary believed in what God could do through her. Elizabeth also believed.. What about you? What will you believe is possible if you let God move in and through you this Christmas?

Amen.