

“BORN OF THE PROPHET MARY”

Luke 1:26-38, 46b-55

A Sermon by John Thomason

Woodbury UMC

December 20, 2020

Many of us cut our teeth as worshipers by learning and reciting the Apostles’ Creed, the oldest confession of faith in the annals of the Church: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary . . .”

I interrupt the creed at this point to note that it makes a passing reference to Christmas and to one of the main characters in the Christmas story, Mary. The creed underscores Jesus’ uniqueness by affirming that the circumstances of his birth are miraculous: he is conceived not by a human being but by the Holy Spirit, and his mother is still a virgin even when he is born. And, of course, this is how Christians refer to her in the Apostles’ Creed and in popular piety – as the “Virgin Mary.”

Now, I don’t propose to tinker with a creed that bears witness to Christian truth and has stood the test of time. But I do want to suggest that Mary’s role in the Christmas story and in the life of the Church could be phrased in another way. How about, “I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the prophet Mary . . .”? That’s right: as surprising as it may sound, Mary functions in the Christmas story as a prophet, which makes a big difference in how we hear and experience her story.

When you and I think of biblical prophets, we usually think of men – more specifically, rough-hewn, tough-talking men who speak truth to power in the name of God. The prophet we most associate with Advent is John the Baptist, who emerges from the wilderness wearing camel’s hair for clothing and eating locusts and wild honey for food. He brings a message that is just as harsh as his appearance and demeanor: he preaches judgment on all Israel, calls for repentance, insists on a ritual cleansing, and points to the arrival of a Messiah who will usher in a radically new age. In so many words, John says: “You may be God’s chosen people, but you’d better get your act together or be prepared to suffer the consequences.” John is typical of the biblical prophets – the messenger is tough as nails, and the message is ominous and demanding.

Needless to say, Mary, the mother of Jesus, doesn’t fit this description. For starters, she is a woman, often pictured in Christian art as a classically feminine, sweet, delicate, and pure woman. “Gentle Mary laid her child, lowly in a manger,” the carol says. She is the very opposite in looks and character from John the Baptist, or from the prophets who precede John in the Old Testament.

And yet, when we look more closely at Mary’s story in Luke 1, we see all the features of a prophet’s calling and a prophet’s message. You and I usually think of prophets as bold and courageous individuals, but they often don’t start out that way. After all, prophets are called by God to do something extraordinary and difficult, to say things people don’t want to hear. It’s no wonder that people who are called to prophesy typically avoid their calling like the plague. Moses protests that he has a stutter and is ill-equipped to be God’s spokesperson before Pharaoh. Isaiah protests that his lips are unclean and that he is unworthy to offer a word from the Lord. Jeremiah protests that he is only a boy, one who lacks the maturity and credibility to be an effective prophet.

Mary, too, is called by God to a special vocation; and by the way, she is not the first woman in the Bible to receive such a calling. Three women who are old and barren – Sarah and Hannah in the

Old Testament and Elizabeth in the New Testament – are all visited by God and told that they will bear a son who will change the course of Israel’s history. The big difference with Mary is that she is youthful and presumably fertile. God promises her a son, too; but otherwise, her circumstances bear no resemblance to those of Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth. In the past, God shows his grace and favor by blessing those who are beyond their child-bearing years. But with Mary, God is doing a new thing – through the pregnancy of an unwed teenager, of all things! God’s grace is not of old, but new and strange and surprising and beyond understanding.

Now notice: when Mary is called by an angel of God to a special vocation – to give birth to the Jewish Messiah – she doesn’t say, “Here I am, Lord, just the person you need.” No, Luke tells us that when she hears the angel’s greeting, she is “much perplexed by his words” (Luke 1:29). The angel says to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God” (v. 30). Well, even if God were to show up in the most inviting form imaginable, Mary would still have good cause to shiver. Elie Wiesel was right: “If an angel ever says, ‘Be not afraid,’ you’d better watch out: a big assignment is on the way.”

Mary responds to her big assignment with appropriate awe and fear, and perhaps a touch of skepticism. She is not a member of the royal family or the priestly class. She doesn’t have the pedigree or the pocketbook to send her child to Yale. She is only an illiterate peasant girl from the backwater town of Nazareth. She is already barefoot; now God wants to make her barefoot and pregnant – while she is still unmarried! And this will not be just any pregnancy; she will give birth to the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, to the Son of God!

Did you catch the lyrics to Amy Grant’s song, *Breath of Heaven*? “I am frightened by the load I bear . . . Do you wonder as you watch my face if a wiser one should have had my place?” These words are really no surprise coming from the “prophet Mary.” When God calls prophets, this is their standard response. Even John the Baptist, the paragon of brazen speech and strength, points to one who is “more powerful” than he is. “I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals,” he says (Luke 3:16). In Mary’s case, her modesty is a large part of her appeal. In some church circles, she is virtually deified, but here she is transparently human. She feels unworthy and unqualified to fulfill her mission from God. God knows, you and I can relate to that.

In the second Methodist congregation I served, the Nominations Committee was seeking someone to chair the Missions Committee. We set our sights on a woman in the church who tutored children after school and worked in the neighborhood food bank. In a modest but meaningful way, she lived and breathed the spirit of missions. We asked her if she would expand her role and lead our whole church in its mission efforts. Now, mind you, we weren’t just trying desperately to fill spots on our church roster. Without being overly pious or manipulating her in any way, we asked her to consider whether our calling might also be a calling from God.

Would you believe, when this woman heard our request, her face turned white with fear. She replied that she felt unworthy to be a church leader because she was divorced, and felt unqualified to be a committee chair because she was an introvert by nature and preferred working behind the scenes. Still, she remained open to our overture and was willing to engage in further dialogue. In a follow-up conversation, we reassured her that our church was appreciative of the gifts she had and not concerned about the gifts she didn’t have. We promised to support her fully in a role that was outside her comfort zone. We also reminded her that God has an amazing track record for choosing and using persons who are unlikely candidates for servant leadership. After much soul-searching and prayer, this woman said Yes and became the chair of our Missions Committee – and a darned good one!

What we have here is the basic pattern of a prophet's calling: a big assignment to a person who feels like small potatoes; a response of ambivalence or outright fear; an assurance of God's grace and provision; and, at last, an affirmative answer. Let me ask you: as prophets go, whose assignment is ever bigger than Mary's? And yet, isn't ours similar to hers? Herbert O'Driscoll captures our inevitable kinship with Mary: "She felt the divine visitation which in some ways comes to us all. What was asked of her was unique, and yet an echo of it reaches all of us if only we have ears to hear. She was asked to offer herself to the divine will, to become a servant. She made her choice, as we all must. Fully and freely she said Yes. For those who say Yes, nothing is ever the same again." Friends, God's calling to us is always like the calling of Mary; God asks to become real in us to take on flesh in our lives.

In the Bible, those who are called have their reasons not to say Yes. Moses has his speech issues; Isaiah is unholy; Jeremiah is too young – and now Mary, who certainly knows the stories of these prophets of old. She is called to be the bearer of God's Son, and she protests that she is just a poor small-town girl who has not been with any man. But in the calling of prophets, God always counter-protests, and uses those who are unusable. We might ask, why Mary, of all people? We presume she is of immense holiness. Wordsworth called her "our tainted nature's solitary boast." Luther pinpointed her humility – a humility that does not even know it is being humble. Others say it is her ordinariness that makes her the sort of person God would choose for this extraordinary mission.

Ultimately, what we realize about Mary is not that she has this or that ability; what she has is simply an availability. "Let it be with me according to your word" (v. 38). As with all of us, God is looking for a readiness, an openness, or what one writer calls "a willingness for whatever." She hears the angel speak of what is impossible; and with considerable courage, naivete, and trust, she goes with it; she lets it be in her. Like other prophets before and after her, she goes through a period of ambivalence and then answers God's call.

But her answer is not complete until she actually speaks like a prophet, until she bears a message of truth from God that is wonderfully good news to some people but inevitably bad news to others. In a surprising, roundabout way, this is exactly what happens in today's story. Mary is told by the angel that her elderly relative Elizabeth is also expecting a child, and Mary goes to pay her a visit. One would expect Elizabeth to be praising God for her own miraculous pregnancy, but instead she focuses on the miracle of Mary's pregnancy. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb," she says (v. 42). Mary responds not by talking like a frightened teenager but by talking like a fearless prophet – and notice, not in a sermon but in a song.

One would expect it to be a sweet song, but much of its content is the antithesis of sweet. She starts out on a positive, soothing note: "The Mighty One has done great things for me" (v. 49). But the song quickly becomes dissonant and disturbing. She sees God's grace and goodness toward her as but a single instance of the ways of God in the wider world, and those ways are revolutionary. [God] "has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (vv. 51-53).

Do you hear it? Mary sounds more like Joan Baez performing a protest song at Woodstock than Barbra Streisand crooning a love song at Madison Square Garden. Mary is singing about social upheaval, about the overthrow of all that the world holds dear and the elevation of all that the world despises. She's singing about the downfall of the big shots in Rome and the rise of all the little people they have put down. She's singing about a world in which those who abuse power will be rendered powerless, and those like herself who have no power – the oppressed minorities, the unwed mothers,

those for whom there is no room in the inn – will be vindicated and uplifted. It's a good thing King Herod doesn't hear what she has in mind, or he'd have an armed regiment waiting for her to show up in Bethlehem.

You see, Mary is not just the expectant mother singing lullabies to the child growing in her womb; she is also the clear-eyed prophet praising a God who is about to turn the world upside down and recognizing that God will do this through her child who is yet unborn. It's ironic that this child will be born in a place we call a "stable," because he is about to make things very unstable. Jesus Christ is born to establish a new kingdom that will destabilize all the world's kingdoms.

You and I think we know the Christmas story and the young woman who is one of its chief characters. "We believe in Jesus Christ . . . born of the Virgin Mary" – the saccharine sweet, squeaky clean teenage girl who is not on anybody's radar. But Mary's story is full of surprises. She is surprised by God with a call to a unique vocation; she surprises herself with her willingness to answer that call; and then we are surprised by the prophetic message she brings.

And so, as the Advent season culminates in Christmas, you and I are invited to expand our familiar creed: "We believe in Jesus Christ . . . born of the prophet Mary" – the Mary who announces a radically new creation and bids us to be a part of it, to align ourselves with persons like herself whom the world discounts but whom God treasures, to affirm the values of God's kingdom rather than the kingdoms of the world.

The late Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, told the story of two vandals who broke into a shop in the middle of the night. They didn't steal anything and they didn't break anything, but what they did caused havoc in the store the next morning. They rearranged all the price tags! Next to the \$150 sweater they put a \$15,000 price tag and next to the \$15,000 fur coat they put a \$150 price tag. Then they hid in the back of the store and waited, with a diabolical glee, to see the faces of the unsuspecting shoppers who entered the shop the next morning.

William Temple employs this metaphor to make a point about the kingdom of God. Temple says that an evil force has broken into God's world and has rearranged all of God's price tags. Next to the things that God says are of "inestimable value" – like family, friendships, prayer, and justice – the evil force has placed a low price tag. Next to the things that God says are of minimal importance – like power, wealth, popularity, and prestige – the evil force has put a high price tag. Our challenge as Christians, Temple says, is to change the price tags back to the way God intended them to be from the beginning of time.

The prophet Mary foresees this change; her Son Jesus inaugurates this change; and you and I are called to continue this change. The wonder of Advent is that we can be prophets, too.