

"THE SONG OF MARY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
December 21, 1997

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INTRODUCTION

It was a cold and windy evening in late November. The hotel was quiet. Only a few rooms were occupied. The bar, however, was quite busy and the banquet room well filled. On one of the upper floors a guest was being disturbed by the sound of a baby crying and finally he left his room to investigate this annoying disturbance where upon he discovered near the Emergency Exit a box and inside the box was a baby. Quickly he ran down to the Front Desk, calling out...

"Come quickly. There's a baby in a box on 7!"

The Assistant Manager dropped what he was doing and followed the guest to the 7th floor and sure enough...there, in a box, was a tiny, newborn baby... screaming. He picked up the box and ran to the office of the General Manager who then "took charge". There was no time to waste for the newborn was in critical condition, suffering from hypothermia and loss of blood. Soon the police arrived, followed by an ambulance and during the hours that followed the doctors worked desperately to save this little life. At long last, in the early hours of the morning, the baby's condition was stabilized.

Meanwhile, back at the hotel, a search for the mother followed with all rooms being checked. Soon it was obvious that the mother had delivered elsewhere and then abandoned the baby at the hotel. Nothing turned up. The media got involved and the story appeared in the papers. Hotel guests, employees and "locals" brought gifts and clothing and money for the Holiday Inn's youngest, "unregistered" guest...newly named Holly Lynn. But there's more...

Adoptive parents brought little Holly Lynn home from the hospital, just in time for Christmas and all rejoiced that this special little girl had found a loving home. And to this day, the parents bring Holly Lynn and her brothers back to visit the Inn where she was born...or found. As I read this story, I found myself wondering if Mary and Joseph ever took Jesus back to see the stable in Bethlehem where He was born. I doubt it. I also wonder how often they told the story in their humble abode in Nazareth of the shepherds and the Star and the Wise Men...and the journey that followed down into Egypt.

DEVELOPMENT

As already noted in a previous sermon, the Christmas Story begins with the birth not of Jesus, but of John the Baptist. Remember...John and Jesus were cousins. In fact, one of the first things that Mary did upon discovering that she was "with child" was to visit her older kinswoman, Elizabeth. And Mary's journey into the Judean hill country to visit Elizabeth was no leisurely Sunday afternoon stroll along a country road. Given the difficulties and dangers that the landscape posed, her support network - Elizabeth and family - must have meant much to her.

That hill country is quite bleak. Some of you have seen it. The eastern slopes are mostly impassable desert, stretching 10 - 15 miles from their highest point, 3000 feet near Hebron, down to the Dead Sea, the lowest point on the earth's surface at 1300 feet below sea level. Imposing cliffs and canyons, a few forts and oases, such as En Gedi, an area fit for fugitives, rebels and hermits and certainly not for a pregnant woman... into her sixth month of her miraculous pregnancy.

Elizabeth was in the sixth month of her own miraculous pregnancy. Luke tells us that the baby in the womb of Elizabeth leaped when Elizabeth first heard Mary's voice, and Elizabeth greeted Mary in these words,

"Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

(Luke 1: 42 - 45)

Mary responded to Elizabeth's greeting with a song, with a hymn that we know as the MAGNIFICAT, so named for the "key" word in the Latin of that first line, "My soul magnifies the Lord". I once read that a student at a certain university got his English history mixed up with the Bible and wrote that,

"When the Virgin Mary learned that she was to be a mother, she sat down and wrote the Magna Carta."

But...NO...Mary sang the Magnificat....in all of her naturalness and in deep humility....singing praises that God had chosen her to bear the Savior of the world and so it was that Mary became the model for all who are "touched" by the hand of God. Several things to take away from this passage, this song...

MARY BELIEVED THAT GOD WAS AT WORK IN HER LIFE

Notice, first of all, that Mary believed that God was

at work in her life. Elizabeth put it so beautifully when she said,

"Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

I've often had the feeling that to a very great extent, life is a matter of interpretation...isn't it? Different things happen to different people and we say "that's life". But some people there are who sense God's hand at work in their lives. Mary did. For instance, when something good and wonderful happens to some people, the first thing they do is to "thank God". And when they are in one of life's lonely and desperate and difficult corners, they know where and which way to turn. They turn....to God! And furthermore, they believe....they believe that God hears their prayers and God responds to their prayers. What a blessing such people are to others.

A question to consider. Where do you turn when you are desperate, shall we say - for hope? When you need some sign...some tiny sign...that God is still at work in your life?

Last March's issue of Guideposts carried a beautiful story that's worth sharing...a little long, but listen carefully. It's about a woman by the name of Lisa Ford....and how she found that sign of hope in a bird's nest. She came a swallow's nest tucked under the roof of her porch and she often peaked at it as these small birds created a comfy home for their anticipated clutch of eggs, and she often found herself wishing that she and her husband, Wayne, would be

or could be doing the same thing....but they weren't having much luck having tried for years to have a child. Oh...they were ready to have a family, but in spite of all of their prayers, they just couldn't conceive.

In May, the swallows laid their eggs and Lisa watched with growing interest to see when they would hatch, but weeks went by and nothing was happening which was unusual for swallow eggs. Gradually, she became more and more emotionally involved in the hatching of those eggs, but still...nothing happened. She even went so far as to call around to various nature agencies to ask for advice. She figured these was a problem and she was told several times that those eggs would never hatch this far after their due date.

All this time, of course, her own hopes for a family were getting tied up in seeing those sparrow eggs hatch...but by now her heart was breaking over the turn of events....but then one evening, she and Wayne, attended a function at the local High School where the High School chorus sang, "His Eye Is On the Sparrow".....remember it, Ethel Waters, a song as you may recall has to do with reassurance, about trusting God who watches out for all His creatures, no matter how small. She left that evening's function with a new sense of peace...her spirit greatly lifted. Later on she said that was a "turning point" and that she knew God was "in" her life and that she would trust God's timing in all things.

There's a happy ending. The sparrow eggs did hatch, six to eight weeks later and gazing on the little birds in that nest, she found herself crying.... realizing that "YES"...she did trust God's timing in all things. For her it was proof that God can work things out in His time and His way. Today she is even more sure of that truth for she and her husband, Wayne, are reminded of it every day as they look at their own two little boys....the children they were finally able to conceive.

Now, I know that some of you hearing this simple story of "faith" and "trust" will put it down to a "nice coincidence" and who knows...maybe it was, but for me, the mind of God is too deep for us to know and I often find myself coming back to that wonderful line one of you once said to me, that....

"Coincidence is God's way of keeping His anonymity".

You may ask WHY...why did God choose Mary to be the mother of God's "own Son"? And, who knows....maybe it was her simple trust that God was at work in her life...no coincidences....that "all things...good things...DO come from God." Mary sings,

"My soul does magnify the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God, my Savior; for He has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden; for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed!"

MARY ALSO BELIEVED IN GOD'S KINGDOM

she continues to sing,

Then, note, too....that Mary also believed in God's Kingdom...for

"He hath showed strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud....He has put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich, He has sent away empty!"

Some scholars have said it is a mistake to "spiritualize" the Magnificat of Mary, that these are among some of the most revolutionary words ever spoken. Through the Messiah, the mighty will be brought low; the humble and the lowly will be exalted. There 's dynamite within it. Jesus, the ultimate revolutionary, completely reverses all human values as He challenges the selfish powers of the earth.

I once read somewhere that William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, warned his missionaries to India never to read the Magnificat in public...for Christians were already suspect in that country and they were cautioned against reading verses in public that were so inflammatory and terrifying to the Establishment, whoever and wherever they are. Such cannot hear these words "gladly" and we may attempt to "spiritualize" these values, but deep down we all know that Jesus has come to turn so much of the world upside down, or perhaps we should be saying...to turn it "right side up".

Bruce McIver tells of a Christmas service that spoke to him of this other side of the Christmas story. It was a crisp, beautiful Sunday in December and every in his church seemed to be in good spirits and no evidence of any grouchiness. The early service...the first of two...went well and as a part of his sermon that morning, Bruce McIver read a snippet from The Saturday Review that went like this...

"Last night, John Elzy, watchman at the Grand Eagle Department Store, while making the rounds of the 'Bargain Basement' found the body of a man lying under a counter. He was thin, to the point of emaciation, in his middle thirties, shabbily dressed. His pockets were empty and there were no marks of identification upon his person. Store officials believe he was trampled in the Christmas rush and crawled under the counter for shelter. But they are unable to account for what appears to be nail wounds in his hands."

After the service, McIver had a few moments to catch his breath before the second service was to begin...time to refresh himself. As he headed toward his office, he saw a small group of people and two police officers gathered outside the glass window to the Church's Nursery. Bruce joined them and looked into the Nursery to see a man sitting there. He was about thirty, extremely thin, dirty and ragged. He was sitting at a small table looking at a children's book. He didn't seem to notice the small group of concerned parishioners peering through the nursery window. Everyone seemed to turn to Bruce, the minister, asking him what he was going to do. Bruce didn't know and no one seemed to know the man's name or how he had gotten in there, or why he was ragged and poorly dressed. The policemen present didn't seem to feel the man was anything of a "threat" and so they left. Bruce was confused by his own thoughts and fears as much as by the insistent voices around him suggesting that he "do something".

About that time, he heard the organ music signaling the beginning of the second service. The congregation had started to sing, "O Come, All Ye Faithful". The ragged man in the nursery stood up and walked out of the nursery, not even looking at the people standing there in the hall and looking at him. He stood in the doorway for a minute or two and then left the church, facing a cold and windy day with only a threadbare jacket on his back. Bruce and the ten or more church leaders stood there....in total silence.

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CHRISTMAS REMINDS US

Christmas reminds us of the "least and the lowly", that Jesus was not born in a palace, but among the homeless in a stable behind an inn. I wonder....where would He be born today? I think it's well for us....in our overwhelming and sometimes suffocating affluence....it is well for us to remember "Mary's Song"...that Christ has come to "lift up" those who have fallen. And her utter confidence that this Child ^{SHL} is carrying is the answer to the needs of humanity....that should be our confidence, too.

I once heard a story about a King who had a troublesome dream. In his dream, he saw a huge pair of scales held in the hand of JUSTICE. The scales seemed to reach from earth to sky....to the very heavens. And in one side of the scales was a pile of gold, jewels, houses and land....all the symbols of earthly power, earthly wealth. On the other side of the scales was a nest of straw. The gold, the jewels, the houses and all the land had tipped the scales down until the nest of straw was high in the air...reaching up to heaven. The gold-laden side of the scales touched the earth. Then, a woman came from the sky with a baby in her arms and she tenderly and gently placed this baby in the nest of straw.

The King in his dream saw the scales slowly begin to move until the Child outweighed the side loaded with gold, jewels, houses and land. The side with the baby touched the earth and the materials tipped to the sky.

Mary saw that kind of "tipping of the scales" in the still unformed life of her unborn Son. And that is what we are celebrating here today and will be celebrating again on Christmas Eve. Like Holly Lynn and her brothers with whom we began this sermon on Mary's Song, we are returning to the site of a very special birth....for in that manger of Bethlehem, as Mary foretold in her song, lies "all the hopes and dreams" of our humanity.

PRAYER

As we "brush up" against Eternal Truth once again in these hours, O God, let us remember Mary...her song, her trust, her belief in You and in the Kingdom of love. Make each of us deeply sensitive to the things of the spirit in these days....remembering how You came to earth and in the life of Jesus, "tipped" the scales in favor of hope, peace, joy and love....that each of us may "magnify" in our lives Your coming to earth. In the spirit of the Christ Child, we pray. Amen.

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