



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"Mary"

A Sermon Series on the Women of Advent

Luke 1:26-38

Dr. Ted Wardlaw, *President*

Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

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I'm honored to be invited to preach here, especially on the Fourth Sunday in Advent and to join with you in what has been for me a morning of splendid worship. My goodness, I feel like we are opening up an alabaster jar of praise until the fragrance of it all wafts up to the heights of heaven. Thank you for allowing me to be here.

I'm humbled to be invited to greet you in this great church on behalf of the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, the only one of our ten Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. seminaries that has little bottles of Tabasco sauce on the table in the refectories at every meal (audience laughter). We are very proud of our relationship with Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church and I'm so delighted that Peter Barnes is here. He is doing and continues to do great things. I remember his mother, Nona Barnes. Every time I went to visit my mother, Nona would say to me, "I pray for you and your ministry every day." I know she prayed for her son and his ministry every day. It is those kinds of prayers that sustain us throughout all the seasons of life. I'm honored also to do my part here to exalt the blessed Virgin Mary as even Presbyterians refer to her from time-to-time in these days as the fourth and final woman you are considering in this season of Advent.

In the days of my childhood in South Carolina and Georgia - and by the way when I hear Jim Bankhead speak, I love that South Carolina accent of his and I want you to know that we will all talk like that some day in heaven. (Audience laughter.) In the days of my childhood in South Carolina and Georgia we didn't talk about Mary a whole lot. In fact, in South Carolina, in the days of my childhood, which was and is the most Protestant state in the country, there was something vaguely suspicious and sinister about Mary. Of course, she showed up on the Fourth Sunday in Advent in scripture readings like this one you heard today. Of course, she was one of the start characters in the manger scenes that we set up in our homes and maybe in the live enactments of those manger scenes that we perform on the lawns of our churches. But other than that, at least in my upbringing in a very Protestant context, the sense was that Mary was probably Catholic (audience laughter). She had a hard time of it in my childhood.

Once as a paperboy, who threw the Charleston Evening Post from my bicycle all over town every afternoon in that little town in South Carolina, I pulled off my route one day to do something that I had been told never, ever, ever to do. There was this little Catholic Church on the edge of town, a tiny little church, St. Anne's Church, a tiny building that looks so exotic and different, far off the beaten path of the courthouse square churches. We children had been told not to ever go inside that church. The only two people that my family knew who worship there were both democrats after all (audience laughter). "Teddy, don't you ever go inside that building." Well on that day, with my paper route almost done, I rode my bike into that church yard and I opened the door and I sneaked into that church. I'll never forget that experience. It was dark and reverent and there was a fragrance of essence in the air and candle wax and there were racks of little votive candles in little red glasses. I tipped toed down the central aisle of that little church until I got to the very feet of this beautiful marble women, tall and serene and quiet and a little above the fray of things - it was Mary. I've since come to love and appreciate so much the Catholic roots of our own tradition. But in that time Mary was a problem.

On the playground at recess, we often talked theology in that little town. We had moved to this little town from Atlanta and I didn't recall a thing about theology being discussed on the playground of Spring Street Elementary School in Atlanta, but now there was theology – it wasn't good theology. It was street theology. Jim Rigby said, "You Presbyterians believe in pre-destination." I said, "Well, what does that mean?" He said, "It means if you step in front a truck this afternoon and get hit, that was decided by God from the beginning of time. Presbyterians believe in pre-destination. Baptists believe in dunking. The Episcopalians drink wine at communion. The Catholics (and he lowered his voice) worship Mary."

Well, that was a problem, praying to Mary, who in turn interceded to Jesus, who passed those prayers onto God. It was too complicated a system. Practically speaking, Mary was not really of much use to us. Outside of our manger scenes, outside of mention on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, she remained that almost forgotten woman, that silent woman made of marble above the fray of things, too ethereal and quiet and best kept locked away in that exotic, religious sub-culture which hardly ever intersected with the people and landscape of my own upbringing.

Then, one day everything changed for me. I went to see one of those Charlton Heston movies in which Mary, surprisingly enough was depicted not as a statue, but as an absolutely striking woman with vibrant red hair and fierce blue eyes and a colorful shawl. She didn't enter a scene as if she was being levitated across the earth, just a little bit above without getting her feet dusty. She was wrapped up enough to cry at the crucifixion scene. She was wrapped up enough to show her defiance in the face of those Roman overlords and because of that blue eyed, red headed, Mary in that movie, I became more interested in learning about her. But to be honest, it is hard to find a good, systematic picture of Mary, even in scripture.

When scripture gives us Jesus' genealogy, as for example happens in Matthew and in Luke, the family tree that grows through the generations from the time of David unto Joseph is Joseph's tree, not Mary's. Elizabeth with whom she visits while she is pregnant, who herself is pregnant with John the Baptist, is a kinswoman, but scripture doesn't tell us whether she is a blood kin or an in-law, so we are left to speculate that if she is blood kin, then she is probably a descendent of Levi instead of David. But then again, she could be a descendent of both or of neither – scripture just isn't sure.

Neither does it tell us much beyond the birth narratives of any ongoing relationship between Mary and her son, Jesus. She is not mentioned going with Jesus on any of his missionary preaching trips. When she shows up, for example, in John's Gospel at a wedding in Canaan of Galilee, even though she bails out a caterer who has run out of wine, by persuading Jesus to take the water and turn into wine, He fusses at her all the same for not getting what her mission is in the world. Later, in Mark's Gospel, when Mary and the family want a word with Him, who knows what it is about, He doesn't excuse Himself from His preaching to go see what they want, instead He just dishes them in front of the whole crowd. He is rude to them. "Who are my mother and brothers? These people are my mother and brothers and sisters." Then pointing to audience He says, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Often it seems that she is just in the way – dull, dismissed, domestic, dead weight - basically not a shaper or leader of much of anything. In the absence of a whole lot of scriptural detail about Mary, we've turned her over the centuries into a kind of passive caricature, until Mary has finally gotten lost inside a job that doesn't take a lot of effort, because in so many areas her job is just to stand there silently across the pages of church and a marble statue to whom we can come to adore and ideal and to light a candle. That at least is a certain Protestant take on Mary.

Yet, I'm still eager to learn from Mary, because I think she has something to teach me and us on this Fourth Sunday in Advent about preparing the way for God's purposes to be born and set loose in the world. Admittedly, she doesn't get many teaching moments. Mark skips the birth of Jesus altogether and Matthew, although he paints Mary into the picture, doesn't give her any speaking lines, she just sits there silently as

things happen around her. But here in Luke's Gospel, that occupies our attention this morning, we may be getting vintage Mary. We may have right here the most complete picture we ever get of Mary. But be warned, if you look at this picture for even a moment you may not like what you see.

In this text, at least, she is hardly a serene Madonna, chiseled mutely in stone, nor is she a cinematic red head with fierce blue eyes. The truth is, as Luke paints her, she is a kid in trouble. She has no money, no social standing, no husband and she is expecting a baby. There are no options in her culture for somebody so thoroughly poor and untitled. She just doesn't matter. Now, right there do you see the distance placed between us and Mary. It is a distance that is all but insurmountable for us who have everything. But across that distance, Mary so utterly forgettable and dispensable, shares with us the only thing she has. Do you know what that thing is? It is a song. She shares her song and it is with this song that she prepares for the coming of God into her midst. It is with this song that she is defined as more effectively that she will ever be defined again. It is with this song that Luke describes it, she peers beyond the landscape of hopelessly and that benighted Judea wilderness and sees something else altogether. She opens her mouth to sing and what she sings of, with hardly any evidence at all to so for it, is a God who has shown strength with his arm, who has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, who has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, who has filled the hunger with good things to eat and sent the rich away empty. She opens her mouth and she sings what is a kind of protest song. A song of resistance. It is with this song that somebody who has absolutely nothing envisions what the world will look like when God is finished with it. Through the means of that Child stirring in her womb and the world that He is going to begin turning upside down, she sings this song.

It is instructive to me that Mary, surrounded by not a clue of such a world anywhere around her, prepares all the same for that time to come, by imagining that world now and by putting it to music and catching this song for us and for people all across time, maybe the most faithful thing the church has ever done with Mary's memory. I believe if we want to find the real Mary, we get our best glimpse of her here, peasant girl, alone in the wilderness of Judea, having nothing and mattering to almost no one – opens her mouth and starts to sing and it is with song, this heart stirring revolutionary world changing song that we envision Mary most authentically reaching out across the distance of time and place toward us.

The question she leaves us with, I think, can we too sing this song? Can we too, who probably have a lot to lose, when what this song describes comes to pass, can we too sing it with expectancy and hope? Can we sing this song, having accepted the hard truth that real deep down goodness can come to none of us unless it comes to all of us? Can we sing of this time to come that Mary sees so clearly and then do what we can in the meantime to assist God in bringing that time about? Can we sing this song in our nice neighborhoods, like this neighborhood and like the one in which I live or is this song too hot to handle for us? Can we sing this song or is it the case that we're not needy enough really to be able to get the words out with conviction? Because, after all by the world's standards we are so blessed. Compared to Mary, we have everything, so maybe sometimes we begin believing that we don't even need God, certainly not Mary's God. We may need a tamer, gentler God of our making, who sort of good-naturedly blesses all of our opinions. But do we really need the God who reaches down further than all of that to lift up the least and the lowly who still struggle for life? It is hard to know, unless we pay attention to the glimpses which even we get of that God once in a while.

The seminary has a relationship, long standing now and in great measure due to the work of Andy Dearman, with a Presbyterian Reformed Seminary in Luska, Zambia, the Justo Mwale Theological College and you have a relationship with that place as well. I've been there a couple of times, and most recently I was invited to go there and spend a month, a few summers ago, in which I would be teaching a class of some fifty Africans, most of them men, most of them members of the Presbyterian and Reformed communities of Zambia, a few Anglicans thrown in. I was going to be teaching them about worship.

Well, I had to get my syllabus done ahead of time. They demanded that of me. So, I planned all the things I was going to teach these people about worship. In the last week of my time there, I was going to be teaching them about music. Have you ever heard the Zambian music? It is heartbreakingly beautiful. They sing in harmonies I've never imagined constructing myself. They sing sometimes without instrumentation and sometimes they sing with the beats of drums and sometimes they sing with guitars. They sing the most heartbreakingly beautiful music. When I was there in chapel with them for the first three weeks of this time with them, I was thinking, I'm going to teach them about music. I had the sense to revise my lesson on that day and instead of walking them through the history of sacred music, I asked them, "Would you please tell me, because I'm so thirsty to know this, tell me what your music means to you." There was a silence and finally Paul Banda, who was the president of the student body that year, raised his hand and said, "Abusa, [which is a term of respect for pastors] as you know times here have often been hard." That is all he said about it – times here have often been hard. Master of understatement. I knew what he meant by that. The corruption of the government, the financial chaos, the revolution going on in Zimbabwe, next door to Zambia, the lack of health care, the lack of any kind of infrastructure. One cardiologist in the whole country of Zambia. "Abusa, times here have often been hard." He went on to say, "It is the music that sustains us. If we can't sing, we can't have faith." I think he is in touch with Mary's song.

It is hard for me to go through this season of this year, without thinking about a parishioner and a dear friend from my church I used to serve on Long Island, decades ago now, but ever since knowing her, Advent is a permanently different season for me because I think of her. It was at this time of year that she was so sick and in the last weeks of her life she was in a hospital in Bronx for people who were terminally ill and I would drive into to see her two to three times a week. There she would be in her bed, incontinent, unable to move, too young to be dying, bald from the strong medicines. She was a brilliant woman and appreciated playwright, a university professor, a thoughtful reader of theology. She didn't want to die. She anguished over leaving behind her teenage son. She cried every time I went to see her. One day we were visiting and talking had ceased and we were sitting there quietly in her room and she turned to me and she said, "Ted, isn't God specific." Well, I've thought about all kinds of names to describe God – Holy, perfect, unchangeable, immutable, but I had never thought of that one. I asked her, "Specific, what does that mean to you, Shirley?" She talked of her life long struggle to know God, to understand God and how difficult a quest it had been and then she listed the ways, at the last, God was answering her.

It wasn't much really, at least not in the ways we define plenty. The ministry of a few friends. An important conversation in which she and other from whom she had been estranged had reconciled. The efforts of those who attended to her. A lady who mopped the floor at night and witness to her. This women was encountering in her own words now that God is love and that God desires nothing more than we reflect that love in specific ways in the world in which she lived and we live and she dwelt on that word specific. "Isn't God specific?" she said. In wonder and in praise at the thought of finding God, strangely enough, amend the bed pans, the vulnerability and the kindnesses of others.

She was in touch, I think, with Mary's God. One who not in generally, but in specific, world changing ways reaches down beneath our pretenses to self-sufficiency and cheers the hearts of those who have absolutely nothing to be cheerful about. She was in touch with the one who overturns the way the world works. The One whose judgment in every sense will save the poor, the wronged and the oppressed and in that hospital room and the expectancy that I saw cross over her tired face, I believe I got a glimpse of Mary's God.

No wonder Mary breaks into singing at the thought of such a God and dares us to sing with her. While I'm a bit intimidated by such a prospect, I'm drawn all the same toward taking up that song myself. But if I'm going to sing with Mary, I will need her help. She will have to take the lead, but if Mary and God can have one Sunday a year, her singing may be a sign that the Holy Spirit who visited Nazareth so long ago is not yet

finished with us. Perhaps the Holy Spirit might yet convict even us so high and so lifted up of how far we are from the kingdom. However far we are though, from across the distance I think all the same that I'm starting to get the tune, it is a painful song, at least for me, and probably for you as well. But it is laced with hope and it is bigger than any other song I've ever heard. So, I'm going to give that song a try.

In fact, we're all going to sing that song in just a moment, because it is a song about a big God. The God of the future who is coming toward us now. Somewhere out there, far away, but near enough for us to feel the ties of kinship an ordinary young girl prepares for the mystery being accomplished inside her womb for the whole world. She hears kingdoms falling and the earth rocking beneath her feet. She wonders at the thought of tyrannies being overthrown and weapons be dismantled and the walls of distrust that divide us by race and neighborhood and nationality, crumbling to the ground. She imagines the impossible and specific ways in which God will answer the longings of generations. She feels the Child move within her as she beats her tambourine and hums her song. It is not lullaby, believe me. But if we listen carefully we too can pick it up. If we have the nerve to follow this God of whom Mary sings, we too can prepare like she does. We too can sing her song until it becomes our own. May it be so.

Amen.

Luke 1:46-55

1984 New International Version (NIV)

Mary's Song

⁴⁶ And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,

just as he promised our ancestors.”