

THE VISITATION

Sermon Presented at St. Paul's Church

4 Advent, Luke 1:39-55, Year C

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I'm tired of preaching sermons about Mary. I'm not tired of *Mary*, who was very real and human. But I am tired of preaching sermons about Mary because I suspect that making her the subject of a sermon allows us to think that she was, from the moment of her birth, uniquely special. I don't want to encourage either myself or you to think that Mary was different in some essential way from you and me.

Now our Roman Catholic brethren would take issue with my understanding of Mary. In 1854, Pope Pius IX declared the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. This doctrine says that the moment Mary was conceived she was kept free of original sin and was filled with the sanctifying grace normally conferred during Baptism. In other words, she was without the stain of sin. Though the Biblical warrant to support this doctrine/belief is tenuous at best, I can appreciate the Roman Catholic Church's rationale. Mary is venerated by the Catholics. She is important to that faith tradition and to exalt her, at least in the minds of Roman theologians, makes sense. As most of you know, Mary figures prominently in my theology and piety as well. I have a special place in my heart for Mary, but for different reasons.

Yes, I can understand their wish to acknowledge her as being different from us mere mortals. However, I believe their attempt to exalt her status in reality robs her of the power of her story. The truth of the matter is that she was a teenage peasant girl from Nazareth, a backwater community that supplied most of the labor force for more prosperous communities like nearby Sepphoris. So when the angel Gabriel appeared to

Mary at the Annunciation, it wasn't to a queen kneeling in prayer, it wasn't a super mortal without sin, but rather an encounter with a peasant who had probably just taken out the trash. I suspect that's how she really appeared to Elizabeth as well when she came to tell her of her pregnancy. Any other understanding of today's story from Scripture is simply a matter of piety gone astray.

In reality, the story of the "Visitation" is about two pregnant peasant women—one older, probably in her thirties and previously thought to be sterile, and a young teenager, probably between 13 and 14 years of age. The older woman carrying the child who would later be known as John the Baptist—and the younger one carrying Jesus, the Son of God. After sharing the good news of their pregnancies with each other, Mary breaks into song. The song, of course, is the *Magnificat* from today's gospel lesson from Luke, which is also our Canticle this morning found in the Daily Office in our *Book of Common Prayer*. (pp. 50, 65, 91, and 119, *BCP*). And what does Mary sing about? She sings of God's subversion. She sings about how God reverses all plans and designs. God chooses the weak instead of the strong, lifts up the lowly, and puts down the mighty. And God makes fruitful both a young virgin and an elderly woman. And Mary knew that she was chosen not because of her purity or goodness—that's the stuff for later and more sentimental generations in the Church. No, Mary was chosen because she was a nothing. Mary sang because she was nobody, and still God broke into her life.

You know, it's a funny thing—many people sing the *Magnificat*, the song of Mary's maternity, to honor the Blessed Virgin because we think she deserves it. **Mary sings about it because she doesn't deserve it.** And that's the real point of this Gospel passage. And that's the point so many of us miss from this story. As long as we project

Mary as the perfect, sinless woman of queenly stature, then we know it's absolutely right that she should be the mother of the Messiah, that the breaking in of God's word into her life was correct and totally to be expected. She is, after all, a special and holy person. Sadly, the result of such an exalted understanding is that after we applaud Mary, we go about our lives unmoved and unchanged because we *know* that we are not made of the same stuff as Mary. Therefore, we cannot reasonably expect the breaking in of God's word into our lives. We cannot reasonably expect "Jesus to find in us a mansion prepared for himself," as it says in our Collect this morning for the Fourth Sunday in Advent.

And when we resign ourselves to such an understanding, Mary weeps. She weeps because we have it all wrong. The episode we call the Visitation says that if God could break into the life of an unlettered, small-town peasant girl, God could and would do it to all the other seemingly insignificant people of the world, people like you and me.

That's what Mary sang about. Also, in this same song of joy, she was heralding the story of the life and mission of Jesus himself. After all, he was born in a stable rather than the Hilton. He grew up in Nazareth, not the capital city of Jerusalem. When he grew up, he hob-knobbed with society's outcasts, the destitute, and those outside the law. What Mary is singing about is simply that same motif—about how much God has preference for those who are nobodies, like herself.

The gospel lesson, therefore, is not the story of the visitation of two uniquely special people or reigning queens. It is the telling of the meeting between two bewildered peasant women who are consumed with joy over God's breaking into their insignificant lives. And when we understand that, we open our lives to God as well.

God breaking into the lives of seemingly insignificant people reminds me of an anecdote I once read about the great contralto, Marian Anderson. She was a magnificent African American woman with a magnificent voice—about whom the Broadway Impresario Sol Hurok liked to say that she had not simply grown great, but rather she had grown great simply. Well, Hurok recalled that one day, at the height of her career, reporters asked Marian Anderson to name the greatest moment of her life. Hurok recounts:

I was in that dressing room when the reporters came in and I was curious to hear the answer. After all, I knew that she had many great moments to choose from. There was the night, for example, when the Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini told Marion Anderson that she had the greatest voice of the century. There was the private concert she gave at the White House for the President and Mrs. Roosevelt and the King of England. There was the time that she received the famous ten-thousand-dollar Bach award from her hometown of Philadelphia. Then, of course, to top it all, there was that famous Easter Sunday in Washington in 1939 when she stood in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial and sang for seventy-five thousand people, including members of the Supreme Court, cabinet members, and most members of Congress.

Which of these big moments did she choose? Sol Hurok said she chose none of them. Ms. Anderson told the reporters that the greatest moment of her life was the day she went home and told her mother she wouldn't have to take in washing any more.¹

That, in a nutshell, is the Gospel message we heard today. Mary was a peasant—a low born living in a hick town called Nazareth. And God changed her life forever when

¹ Rowell, Edward, *Fresh Illustrations*, (Baker Books, 1997).

He picked her to be the mother of the Messiah. And Marian Anderson came home and told her mother she wouldn't have to take in washing anymore. The Blessed Virgin and Marian Anderson's mother, two women with modest expectations in life whose lives were radically and unexpectedly altered forever. And with respect to Mary, what God did for her, He can do for you and me. So today, on this Fourth Sunday in Advent, let's prepare for the breaking in of God's Word into our lives.

AMEN