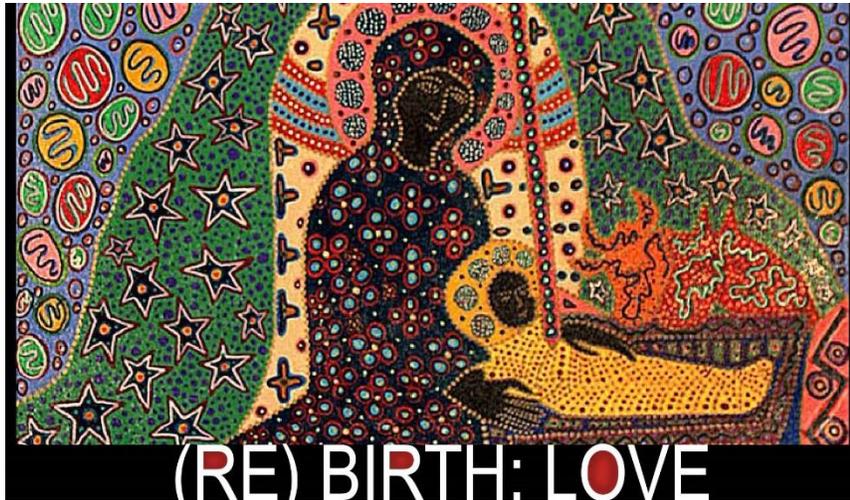


MAGNIFYING LOVE

A Sermon by Rev. John Weems

December 20, 2015



Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

SEVERAL YEARS BACK, I WAS HAVING DINNER WITH MY BROTHER AND PARENTS, talking about the many good times we had growing up in Idaho. As we told stories, the conversation turned into a bit of a confession about things my brother and I had done that weren't quite on our parents' radar. You know, like the times we ate too many cookies and drank one too many glasses of milk, or stayed up past our bedtime reading the Bible or went to church too often—that sort of thing. Though I was more than 30-years-old at the time, my mom looked at me in disbelief as I tarnished her images of me as little baby Johnny. We're now more than a decade past that conversation, and I'm hoping this year I don't get any lumps of coal in my stocking after my mom watches this sermon online ☺

The reality is that when we start or birth anything—a child, a job, a relationship—many surprises will come our way.

Today's Scripture focuses on Mary, mother of Jesus. Before we get to the Nativity or the cross, let's take a moment to consider the time when Mary had to break her life changing news to her parents. Though the Gospels in the official Bible canon do not contain any details, other accounts of the Holy family surfaced through the years, including the unofficial one in the Gospel of James. Imagine Mary coming home to speak with Anne and Joachim, the future grandparents of the Messiah: "Mother and Father, I'm expecting a baby . . ." These words alone would have been enough to disrupt a family for generations. Mary's engagement to marry Joseph was a transaction, resulting in the passing of property and stability. The young woman's purity was a deal breaker. When combined with the emotional aspects of raising a daughter, I think it is safe to say Mary was in big trouble. I don't imagine that Anne and Joachim were buying Mary's explanation that there was this angel named Gabriel, and that the baby was miraculously inspired.

There is a gap between the 38th and 39th verses of the first chapter of Luke. Think of all of the emotion and fear in that gap—Mary sent away, Joseph embarrassed, Mary's parents, well . . . In verse 38, Mary seems to have

accepted the news that she will give birth. Then Gabriel departs. The scene immediately jumps to verse 39, with Mary departing to the Judean hill country to stay with Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist.

From this time of chaos, young Mary responds with some profound words sometimes known as “The Song of Mary,” or “The Magnificat”:

Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said,
‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He 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.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

“The scene is absurd,” explains Charles L. Campbell of Duke Divinity School. “The coming of the Messiah who will redeem Israel is anticipated and proclaimed, not by archangels or high priests or emperors or even ordained preachers. Rather, two marginalized, pregnant women—one young poor, and unwed, the other far beyond the age to conceive—meet in the hill country of Judea to celebrate (and possibly commiserate about) their miraculous pregnancies.”¹

Dr. Campbell describes Mary’s words as a subversive song, which inspired the “Feast of Fools,” a name for festivals celebrating the reversal of status represented by Mary.² People would wear church vestments inside out, cross dress, and blow ashes into each others’ faces. Some churches even had the audacity to bring a live donkey into the church sanctuary to remember the holy family fleeing to Egypt after the birth of Jesus.³

God’s longstanding history of showing up where the world least expects a Divine experience continues through today’s Scripture lesson. While I believe our Creator is with us in beautiful sanctuaries and elegant homes and government buildings, it seems that those in positions of power—in Mary’s time, and today—are less likely to listen.

Elizabeth and Mary were birthing world changes in John and Jesus. I hope they had years of the fun and lighthearted memories that I would wish for every parent. Young John, scaring his mother by eating bugs that would become a central part of his diet and pretending to baptize dolls as he told them to repent. And can you imagine what Mary must have witnessed Jesus do before asking him to turn water to wine at the wedding at Cana. Maybe they had days when John and Jesus were just regular boys to them, without wondering what big things were in store for them.

God had called them on a bigger mission. “Magnificat” in Latin means, to magnify.

¹ Charles L. Campbell in Bartlett, David L., and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting On the Word, Year C (4 Volume Set)*. 4 vols. Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, pg. 95.

² For a detailed history of the Feast of Fools, see the book Campbell references by Max Harris: *Sacred Folly: a New History of the Feast of Fools*. Reprint ed: Cornell University Press, 2014.

³ On many occasions through the years, Calvary has included a donkey as part of our Epiphany services in early January.

Mary sang of magnifying God through love of a sacrifice she could not imagine.

She was called to be part of the Great Reversal, in which the poor, the outcast, the foreigner, the one who didn't make the team, or couldn't organize enough of a fundraising campaign to get elected, could be the one God is really calling.

We are called to be part of the same Great Reversal.

We are called to magnify God's love.

Anne couldn't imagine exactly where that would take Mary.

Mary couldn't have foreseen all the change that Jesus would bring.

Whether you're in elementary school or are more than 100-years-old, God has more for you to do to magnify love.

In the past two weeks alone, I have had conversations with people from Calvary who are magnifying love. One feels called to support global refugees. Another is helping build a company that assists people in buying homes, while another is impacting global health, and still another is starting a media company to reclaim the good that can come from responsible journalism.

God is birthing ideas that magnify the love of Christ in this place!

Those ideas will take directions you can't necessarily envision right now.

Some of the God things emerge from times of great struggle and pain.

This past week, I listened to a mother describe her son in this way:

"He was the best of me."

She described her son, who was christened and baptized at an early age, as a "beautiful spirit," who was always happy, and always scooting around, earning him the nickname Scooter Bug. That young man was born in San Francisco, lived in Houston for a few years, then returned to San Francisco to attend El Dorado Elementary, Martin Luther King Middle School, and Balboa High School. He had a passion for music and film, making a short video *Bayview Now and Then in Hunterspoint*. That mother shared that her son had spent some time incarcerated, but had paid his dues and lined up a full time job.

She described how she was driving home from work one evening when her phone started buzzing. A video had surfaced with an unidentified man being shot multiple times by police. One of her loved ones sent a message, saying, "That looks like Mario."

Gwen, Mario Woods' mother, watched the video and could not believe this to be true.

No mother would want to believe this to be true.

She described going to the police station, and not being able to get any information, then being given the runaround until finally receiving an unconfirmed report that Mario had been shot multiple times.

Gwen and the many passionate friends, family, and clergy who spoke at Mario's funeral last Thursday do not want Mario to be another statistic of an African American man being killed in San Francisco. Before the service, I had a conversation with Bishop Ernie Jackson of Grace Tabernacle and Rev. Dr. Amos Brown of Third Baptist Church. Dr. Brown was one of eight students selected to take the only class Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., ever taught. He was a Freedom Rider, San Francisco President of the NAACP, and many more honors than I can mention here.

Dr. Brown lamented the reactive nature of the community through the decades, showing up in times of crisis, then disappearing. He went on to cite statistics about the African American population of San Francisco shrinking to less than five percent, but representing more than 50 percent of the jail population. Getting a jury of peers is virtually impossible as the population drops every year. He told me that just over 50 percent of black students graduate from high school in this city.

At Mario Woods' funeral, Sister Stephanie Burch spoke. Burch's 15-year-old son was gunned down outside of his high school in 2008. She told Gwen Woods that she had been initiated into a group that no one wants to join, but that she was not alone. She invited all of the mothers present at the service to come forward. I didn't count and didn't need to. It was overwhelming to see a crowd surround and hug Gwen and pray.

Each of those young mens' lives was sacred. Each was a beloved child of God.

I told Dr. Brown and Bishop Jackson that based on evidence I have seen over the past few months, that the Calvary community is ready to listen and take action.

How will we magnify love?

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