

12/18/2016 – Advent 4 --“Welcoming the Stranger” –

Rev Seth D Jones © Scripture: Luke 1:26-55

Jesus says, “*I was a stranger and you welcomed me*” (Matt 25:35). At this time of year, we often hold up the Holy Family as an example of a refugee family, and especially in the midst of a massive refugee crisis, we use them as an object example that the rejection of refugees is a rejection of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. Have you heard this before?

We are actually in the midst of one of the largest refugee crises in modern history. The war in Syria has generated a massive swell of people who cannot live amidst the bombs, the shootings, and the violence. They have flooded into Europe and are seeking asylum in France, Germany, England, Canada, and the United States. Rich, poor, educated, uneducated, men, women, many children – this is what warfare does; this is what happens when warlords, demagogues, and global power brokers lose their imaginations and ability to engage conflict. People die, and families lose their homes.

Just a few weeks ago, the French destroyed the refugee camp at the entrance to the Chunnel in Calais. It was a horrific scene. People died. Another refugee crisis is happening in Europe as well. This refugee crisis is centuries old and the people involved carry with them the stigma of being the last justified prejudice in the Western world. Just this week, France followed with Italy and Greece, and evicted 2500 of these people *from the country*. The Romani people, pejoratively called ‘Gypsies’ by most of the world, have suffered at the hands of prejudice, government, and nationalism for almost 1200 years. A Roma mother and child are on the cover of the bulletin this week. This is a village in Romania. The poverty is crushing and it would not be an exaggeration to say the government and the surrounding non-Roma villages hate them. How shall we welcome the refugee, the excluded, the hated?

It is easy to place Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus in a similar context. This is not wrong, but it is also not fair to the story being told.

I think there is a better way to talk about the Holy Family; it is more appropriate to speak of the Holy Family as *The Ones Who Welcome*. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are the welcoming presence for those who are considered “Other”. Our story today is filled with *welcoming*. The angel Gabriel welcomes Mary, Mary welcomes the Holy Spirit and the new life within, Elizabeth welcomes Mary, John the Baptist in Elizabeth’s womb welcomes Jesus in Mary’s womb, and Mary welcomes everyone in her Psalm of praise, the Magnificat.

In so many ways, Mary’s story is simple. It is the story of a mother and a future child. She could be anyone. She could be the Roma mother and child in the picture, and that is the point. We can understand Mary’s experience because she is like us, and because she welcomes us into being like her. God has, as Mary says, *looked upon the lowliness of His servant*. Who among us does not know the lowliness of our position before God? And it is to one such as this that God sends his angel to announce a ‘*great reversal*’ in the history of the world.

Mary welcomes this shift in world history and in the spiritual history of each of us with the words, “*Let it be to me according to Your word*”.

The words of acceptance and welcome are the most intimate and resolved in Scripture, because by welcoming God into her deepest being, Mary provides an example for all of us for how to welcome the unknown, the stranger, the Other into our lives.

Mary begins her song of praise by saying,

“My soul magnifies the Lord”.

To magnify the Lord means, once we have committed ourselves to God, once we have said with Mary *Let it be unto me*, we have committed to seeing God in all that happens to us and in the world. How is the Lord present here, in this situation? We magnify the presence of God. But to magnify God means we, like Mary, must see that we have already been **magnified in the eyes of the Lord**.

“Blessed are you, Mary, among women, for you have found favor in the eyes of God”, Elizabeth says when she welcomes Mary at her house. The thing about being magnified by God, about being the favored one of God, is that it can only be true for me, a lowly servant of God, if it is also true for everyone else. God magnifies you and I, Mary, the Syrian child in Aleppo, the Roma mother in Romania and Hungary. And in being magnified by God, we can, like Mary, magnify the Lord. The beginning of welcoming the Other, the stranger, is magnifying the presence of God in the Other and the stranger.

I wonder what the situation would be like for the Roma and refugees of the world if we knew them to be, like us, and like Mary, to be magnified by the Lord? I didn't find out I shared ethnic heritage with the Roma until I was in my late teens. My grandfather grew up in an orphanage and didn't share his background until my mother asked.

He sent a letter that described a fantastic tale of love between an Orthodox Jew and a Hungarian Roma woman; a violent moment of insubordination against a Hungarian officer; and a quick exit to leave the country and come to America. In a few paragraphs of a letter, I came to share a heritage with one of the most oppressed groups in Europe. How do we welcome those who are on the run, those who wish to live as they are, rather than be altered and changed by the state or nation that takes them in? How do we live with those who are different among us? After hearing about my ancestors, now I care about how we answer these questions.

This is why Mary is so helpful in my understanding, especially when I see the Holy Family from the perspective of my heritage. Mary welcomes God into her deepest being. Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus become the family we are welcomed into from wherever we may have come. This week, at least, we knock on the door of their home and we bring our entire being to the family of Christ.

I believe the example of Mary asks each one of us to welcome the Other into our lives in the same way Mary welcomes Jesus into her physical and spiritual being.

Mary says a little later in her song, *“Surely, from now on, all generations will call me blessed”*. This does not sound like humility, does it? This is not the voice of a lowly servant, is it?

Is this something you imagine yourself saying - that your descendants will call you blessed because you have been blessed by God? But, if not...why not? If we have been magnified in the eyes of God and are therefore able to magnify the Lord in our daily lives and in others, why do we not know ourselves to be blessed by God? After the announcement from the angel Gabriel and after the Holy Spirit has conceived within Mary God's Son, Jesus Christ, she goes to visit Elizabeth. Elizabeth, if you

remember, is the wife of Zechariah, a priest of the Temple of the Lord. Zechariah also suffers an Annunciation from an angel of the Lord.

He is told Elizabeth, who is barren, will have a child named John, who will be the one who announces the coming of the Christ. And so, when Mary is welcomed at Elizabeth's house, John, still inside his mother, recognizes the one whom he will announce to the world, Jesus Christ.

Elizabeth sees all this for what it is and says to Mary, "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb...and blessed is she who believed there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken by the Lord*". A **presumption of blessing** comes from the dignity of seeing the Lord magnified in the world and in others. Rather than an expression of supreme arrogance, Mary's expression of blessedness by all generations is a universal truth for each of us. Mary and Elizabeth show us what it means to approach the world and others with a presumption of blessing. The presumption of blessing is a powerful foundation for welcoming the stranger, the Other, the unknown. We therefore, with Mary, presume that those who are magnified in the eyes of the Lord are also blessed.

This means you and me, the Syrian refugee, the Roma mother and child on the bulletin.

Isn't that worth being remembered for generations, you who, like Mary, have accepted the presence of Christ in your deepest being? Aren't you, who is magnified by the Lord through Christ and who has shared in some way in the blessings of the Lord, worth being remembered for all generations? God thinks so, and so does the one whom God favored to carry God's Son, Mary.

Mary quotes Psalm 126 and says, *The Mighty One has done great things for me*. Psalm 126 is short. It reads:

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
'The LORD has done great things for them.'
The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.*

*Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.*

This is a Psalm of remembering. In quoting it, Mary **remembers** the Prophets. She **remembers** that she is participating in a Prophetic story that stretches back into the beginnings of time. She is inhabiting a story that is all about welcoming, all about making space in our hearts, our minds, and our homes for the stranger and the Other. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin says, "*Then when G-d asks [Cain], 'Where is your brother Abel?' he arrogantly responds, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?' In essence, the entire Bible is written as an affirmative response to this question.*"

How will I create a welcoming place for my brother and sister? Am I my brother and sister's keeper?

Scripture says, “*Yes, yes you are*”.

Mary says, “*Yes, yes you are*”.

Memory is a powerful thing. It used to be that people remembered by telling stories to one another. The memory of the past was carried forward in the stories we told one another. It seems like we no longer do this, but I think we do. We just do it differently now. Regardless, the important thing here is that *storytelling is always remembering, and remembering is always storytelling*. The memories we share with one another tell the story we want others to remember. Some cultures are better at this than others.

America, as a nation, wanted to create its own story, and some people come to this country to create a new story for themselves and their past. We have, pretty much unlike every place else in the world, created a place to do that over the last 240 years. America is a place where stories get rewritten.

Many, many people come to this country from cultures of storytelling, places where remembering is how family and country is handed down from one generation to the next.

The Roma are a people of stories. They tell stories about themselves, and the stories of myth and legend are always about themselves. The story they tell one another is very different from the story they tell the police, the government, and outsiders. I like that, and take great comfort and pride that this way of telling stories and remembering is part of my heritage. What is your story? How do you remember it? How we remember is part of the story.

Remembering is what we are about as a church, it is what we are doing every Sunday. “*Do this in remembrance of me*”, Jesus tells us when we share the bread and the cup together. Remembering is what Mary is doing in her song. She is telling a new story based on the story that Psalm 126 is referring to, which is based on the story the Prophets tell, which is based on the story of the Torah.

Mary wraps herself into this story and makes her personal story a part of that greater story, that larger memory. Story within story, stretching back through time. This is where truth resides, and the story is the house into which we are welcomed by Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, and Jesus. Here is where we enfold our story into this greater story.

This is the last Sunday of Advent. Next Saturday, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. We have waited, in an impatient human way, and in a spiritual, deep way. We have watched externally for signs of the Messiah, but more importantly, we have looked inwardly for when and how we can be welcoming the new life of the Lord into our lives. And we have wondered what all these things mean. We have awakened a Holy Curiosity about our faith and the life Christ calls us toward. And so now, by **magnifying the Lord** in the world, in others, and in our souls, and by holding a **presumption of blessedness** for all who come to us and all whom we meet, we **remember the story** of how God has welcomed us, and so we welcome the Lord.

Thomas Merton, the Benedictine monk, once said, “*What is uncertain is not the coming of Christ but our reception of him, our own response to him, our own readiness and capacity to go forth and meet him.*” Let us, then, be like Mary, and welcome the coming Christ, and magnify the Lord. Let us be like Mary, and welcome the coming Christ, and presume that you and all whom will share this season with you are blessed by the Lord. Let us be like Mary, and welcome the coming Christ, and remember the great things God has done for us. May your Christmas be blessed.