

12/24/18 - Christmas Eve

Women of the Bible: Jesus and Mary: What Shall Be Revealed? Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: The Magnificat Luke 1:46-56

We have spent the past few months going through the women of the Bible, and the culmination of that series is tonight, with Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

I think when many of us think of church and what Jesus does, we think of a problem to be solved. Jesus solves problems for us, and the problems are any number of things - sin, brokenness, separation from God. Jesus is the great *problem-solver* and we are the ones with the problem and Jesus manages, solves, and reverses the problem. The church has called this solution *redemption, or salvation*.

For those of you who have come to church for many, many years, this is familiar to you. You are a sinner, and so am I. For those of you who only come to church occasionally, like tonight, or for a funeral, or a wedding, the expectation many of you come into this holy space with is that, at some point, the pastor will tell you of your sin and how Jesus is the solution to the problem of ... **you.**

I won't stand up here and deny 20 centuries of theological study and say that sin doesn't exist and that it isn't a problem. There is sin, and we all participate in the evils of this world, either directly or indirectly. What I will tell you is that redemption isn't what we think it is. Redemption, salvation, is, very simply, the ways in which God reveals the incredible, profound, and beautiful grace and love God has for each of us. And Jesus? Well, Jesus is, very simply, what God's grace and love looks like in the flesh, in a human life.

God is revealing God's self to us, over and over again and tonight, The Christ, the Messiah, the one who redeems the world, is being revealed to the entire world. Tonight, we are not solving problems here; we are revealing God's love and grace in the person of Jesus the Christ.

Which brings us to Mary. Throughout our study of the women of Scripture over the past few months, we have seen how women take on with their bodies the promises of God, on the one hand, and the brutalities and brokenness of the people around them, on the other hand. Jesus in the arms of his mother, and Jesus on the Cross, takes promise and brokenness into his being and reveals to us that God intends so much more for us than just a spiritualized escape from God's glittering creation, or just a physical experience that crashes down on us.

When the Angel Gabriel comes to Mary of Nazareth, Gabriel reveals what will happen with Mary. She will conceive a child by the Holy Spirit, and that child will be holy and be called the Son of God. If we are honest with one another, and if we examine the story that follows, this revealing to Mary does not solve a problem. Instead, this revealing of Gabriel will create many, many problems for Mary, and especially for Jesus.

Isn't this true for you and I as well? When the reality and truth of a situation is revealed to us, often a new set of problems arises. What we solved and worked out actually creates a whole new set of problems to be dealt with. Maybe it is a messed up family situation. Maybe it is an addiction that is being overcome. Maybe it is an illness or surgery that you need to recover from. Maybe it is the loss of a loved one over the past year or so that weighs on you. Once we solve those difficult problems, now we have to deal with new issues, no matter the judgment we put upon them. How do I relate to family members who have harmed me, or how do I now navigate a life without them now? How do I find work in my community where everyone knows I was selling heroin or eating pills before I got clean? How do I live life now that I have no kidney, or an artificial heart, or cancer in remission? How do I live in this huge house alone?

See, God is in the business of revealing things to God's people, not solving problems. Mary, in her beautiful Psalm, which we call **The Magnificat**, tells us what God has revealed to her and what God will do through Jesus. God has revealed strength. God has revealed the false ideologies of the proud. God has revealed that the powerful really just live in an illusion of power, because they have no eternal power. God has revealed that food and prosperity are meant for all people, especially those who are in need, and that the hoardings of the rich are worthless.

This word, "reveal", appears over and over again in these early stories of the beginnings of our faith. Looking backward, this is true even centuries before the arrival of the Christ. God reveals to the Prophet Isaiah what a gathering of God's people looks like. Isaiah reveals:

for all peoples

a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,

of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain

the shroud that is cast over all peoples,

the sheet that is spread over all nations;

he will swallow up death for ever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,

and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,

for the Lord has spoken. (Is 25)

There is nothing here about problems being solved. The Great Banquet Isaiah reveals is a vision of how things are supposed to be as we live into the revelations that have taken place in the history of God. Throughout Scripture, God reveals the reality of God's grace and love to the world. God and Jesus Christ do not solve problems. Sometimes, great thinkers have pointed out we, as God's followers, have done exactly nothing to receive these revelations. All that has happened is that an unbelievably beautiful way and path has been revealed to us - a future of

peace, innocence, possibility, and grace which includes all people; and a present reality as well, if we wish to live into it right now.

The work is to stay open to the revelations, to walk together into the vast splendor of the towering, shimmering love with which God wants to surround us. Later tonight, we will hold up candles and light the church with an image of God's love, and ours as well. What I want for you all is to walk away from here with the revelation that what you have seen outside yourself in this night of Word, and music, and prayer, and fellowship, is what is inside of you as well. This commitment to the continual revealing of God's presence and love is the hard work of our faith; it is also intimate work, like being with a woman giving birth on a dark night many, many years ago. But this is holy work.

How will we be agents of God's love and grace, provocateurs of God's everpresent beauty?

St. John of the Cross was a follower of Teresa of Avila. Teresa spoke of the Interior Castle of the Soul. It had been revealed to her that each of us is a shimmering castle of the Lord, and if only we saw this in ourselves and in others, we would learn to love what God loves, we would learn to become glittering shimmering beings ourselves.

St. John wrote a poem about Mother Mary and this night and he speaks to the hard work of living into God's revelation to us. It is called "If You Want", and it goes:

*If
you want
the Virgin will come walking down the road
pregnant with the holy,
and say,
"I need shelter for the night, please take me inside your heart,
my time is so close."
Then, under the roof of your soul, you will witness the sublime
intimacy, the divine, the Christ
taking birth
forever,
as she grasps your hand for help, for each of us
is the midwife of God, each of us.
Yet there, under the dome of your being does creation
come into existence eternally, through your womb, dear pilgrim—
the sacred womb in your soul,
as God grasps our arms for help; for each of us is
His beloved servant
never far.*

*If you want, the Virgin will come walking
down the street pregnant
with Light and sing ...*

Helping God in this world takes work. Even so, we are called to become revealers of what God through Jesus Christ has revealed to us. And what has been revealed to us is that we, like Mary, are carriers of the Christ, a revelation that should be as powerful as the Angel Gabriel showing up at our own bedsides.

Mary knew Jesus wasn't a problem-solver. Instead, when Jesus began his ministry, he met blind people in his wanderings, but Jesus didn't solve the problem of blindness. *Jesus revealed sight to the blind.* Jesus met sinners wherever he went. He didn't solve the problem of their sin. Instead, with the words "Follow me", he *revealed an incredibly beautiful life waiting for those who answered the call, a life that revealed the fantastic beauty of God's creation.* Jesus met the families of dead people. He didn't solve the death problem for those families. Instead, *Jesus revealed the death-defying power of life as it courses through the eternal and the physical world, a power given by God to all creation.* And with his mother, Mary, at the end of his life, as he hung from the Cross, Jesus did not solve the problem of what Mary would do for a family now that her only Son was dying. Instead, *Jesus revealed new ways of being family, a family defined by God's love and grace made up of people chosen by Christ, rather than chosen by histories and dysfunctions and bloodlines.*

God's way is to always reveal God's love to us because God is an artist of the soul, and you are the canvas upon which the most magnificent painting is being created. This painting is continually being revised and touched up, a perfecting of what has already been called 'very good' by God, a continual, ongoing celebration of creation within and around you. Psalm 8 puts it this way:

*O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.*

...
*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,*

*and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

It is not that there aren't problems to be solved. Psalm 8 should hold in high-relief for us how we do not tend to the gifts that God has given us well. The gift of creation suffers deeply for our lack of tending. The point of the Psalm, though, is that God is not solution-oriented, like we are. God wants to continually reveal God's love and grace to God's creation. Mary, in the face of all the potential problems before her, accepts the revelation, a revelation which changes the world, saying to the Angel,

Let it be unto me, according to your word.

She commits to the revealing of Gabriel, and then spends the rest of her life attempting to live into this amazing revelation.

No problem has been solved here tonight. Instead, God reveals in the birth of Christ that we are called, like Mary, to live deeply into the relationships, the beauty, the love and the grace that God has given us. That revelation is embodied in the life, death and resurrection of God's Son, and Mary's too, Jesus Christ.

May he continually be revealed to us in the midst of our struggles and problems. Let us, like Mary, ponder these things in our hearts, and with Mother Mary, Let it be, according to the Word of God revealed to us this night.

Play King of Kings by LBM.

Merry Christmas.

AMEN.