



That Mary...Now She Could Preach!

Luke 1:39-55

December 24, 2006

I know why you're here: you have shopped and now you have dropped! You have dropped yourselves into this sanctuary in the hopes that some degree of sanity might come back into your life and back into Christmas. Here is a quote I read in the paper:

There are worlds of money wasted, at this time of year, in getting things that nobody wants, and nobody cares for after they are got.

Guess when that was written: not in 2006, not even in 1956, but in 1850(!) by Harriet Beecher Stowe. The truth is, Christmas has always been insane, even from the first time the church focused on December as the time to celebrate Christ's birth. It has always been hard to keep Christ in Christmas. There never has been an innocent and simple Christmas when someone wasn't trying to make a buck off Baby Jesus.

So here you are, shopped and dropped and frazzled and flopped, hoping against hope for a simpler, calmer, Christ-centered Christmas, and here is your preacher telling you that there has never been such a thing, that Christmas has always been a crazy mix of selfishness and sacrifice and violence and peace from year one. You didn't come in here to hear that.

But I have good news. I want to tell you about someone who was able to keep Christ in Christmas even though she too was surrounded by selfishness and violence. Her name was Mary. Listen to Luke 1:39-45 (read).

I. ELIZABETH'S SONG: MARY IS THE MODEL BELIEVER

On the Johnny Carson Show, Ed McMahon would always give him a grand introduction, "Heere's Johnny!" But that was nothing compared to the introduction Mary gets here. A baby jumps for joy... while still in the womb! The mother who carries him, Elizabeth, is so filled with the Holy Spirit that she cries out to her cousin Mary: "Blessed are you among women." Mary *is* blessed, not only because she will be bearing the Christ Child, but also because when God spoke, Mary believed. She believed that the impossible Word that God had told her would be possible. She submitted herself to obey that Word: "I am a slave of the Lord: let it be with me according to your Word." (Luke 1:38 paraphrase) In the words of Augustine, Mary conceived Christ first in her heart before conceiving him in her womb.

Mary is the model believer. “She hears God’s word, holds it fast in an honest and good heart..., and brings forth fruit...” (Charles Talbert, *Reading Luke*, p. 24) Mary ponders everything in her heart. But not only does Mary ponder, Mary also speaks. When she meets her cousin Elizabeth, Mary has a lot to say about the meaning of what God was doing. Consider this: in all the birth narratives of the gospels, the most comprehensive statement of the meaning of Jesus’ birth comes from...his teenage mother. Now then, brothers and sisters, all ye who have verily shopped until you have dropped, since Mary is the model of faith, since she is the ultimate example of how to keep Christ in Christmas, then when she speaks about the meaning of Christmas, should we not pay attention?! Here is the meaning of Christmas, according to the mother of Jesus. It comes in two parts. Here is the first part: (Read Luke 1:46-50).

II. PAYING ATTENTION TO MARY: THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

I tell you, that Mary, now she could preach! She could preach as well as Ann Graham Lotz, maybe better! This first part of Mary’s message is a personal confession of the meaning of what God has done for her:

...he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant...
...for the Mighty One has done great things for me...

Her words are full of images and themes from the Hebrew Scriptures. She speaks like Hannah did when God gave her a child named Samuel and Hannah gave Samuel back to God. Mary speaks of God’s grace for her, a grace to which she responds with faith.

But then, Mary says, enough about me. What God has done for me, God is doing for the whole world. In one small event, the greater event lies hidden. (Talbert, p. 24, quoting R. C. Tannehill) “Mary began to preach the new kingdom.” (Words of an early church father, Ephrem the Syrian) Here is the second part of her message: (read Luke 1:51-55).

II.A. CHRISTMAS: A MORAL REVOLUTION

The second part of Mary’s message is that God will bring about nothing less than a MORAL REVOLUTION: “...*he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*” In our human pride we trust in our own strength. We have pride in our own technology. We have pride in our own understanding to get ourselves out of the mess of ordinary life and into something that passes for a good life. That’s the imagination of our hearts. But it is a mere figment of our imagination. The truth is we cannot get ourselves out of the moral messes we get ourselves in; that is the reality of sin. But God scatters the proud. God makes us face the truth about ourselves: that our only hope is that something or someone from beyond might save us.

To accept God’s salvation is to confess that I, with all my pride in the imagination of my heart and the plans of my mind, am still clueless as to how to save myself. I need God to come into my heart and to create a moral revolution in me. That is what Shane Floars is saying today with his baptism. He confessed that “Jesus is his Savior, his

rescuer from sin and from death.” So now there is a revolution in the whole direction of his life. Now Shane has committed himself to “make Jesus his Lord, his leader through all the days of his life.” On this Christmas Eve, Shane is making the ultimate gift, giving himself to the Lord.

But back to Mary, who is not finished yet, because God is not finished yet: God’s strong arm causes not only a moral revolution in individuals, but also A MORAL REVOLUTION IN WHOLE COMMUNITIES. Let’s read verses 52-53 again:

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.

This sounds like one of the Old Testament prophets, but this time it is Mary who’s prophesying. She is so sure of the prophecy that she describes it in the past tense. God’s community revolution is such a sure thing that it is as good as done. And what God is doing is nothing short of a grand reversal, in which the powerful and the lowly trade places. Mary reveals God’s surprising concern for the hungry, the lowly, and the forgotten.

This teenage mother has evidently done a LOT of pondering. She understood far more than we give her credit for! And God would use Mary to pass this pondering on to the boy Jesus at her knee. When Jesus began his ministry, he would declare the same moral revolution in communities. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor,” he preached. “It’s harder for a rich man to get into heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle,” he joked. And at the end of his ministry, when he said good-bye to his disciples, he showed them once again how God turns the powerful into the lowly by taking a basin and towel and kneeling before each one of them to wash their feet. That’s how God began the grand reversal through Jesus, not in power, but in weakness.

IF THERE WAS ANYONE WHO EVER UNDERSTOOD THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS, IT WAS MARY. Christmas means a moral revolution in individuals. Individuals give up the prideful imagination that they can save themselves, for the humble realization that only Jesus saves. Christmas also means a moral revolution in communities. Communities give up the prideful imagination that the rich can exploit the poor, for the humble realization that Jesus sends the rich out with basin and towel to kneel and serve the poor.

That’s the meaning of Christmas, according to Mary. Now it’s up to us whether we can keep Christmas like she did. Can we say like she said, “I am the Lord’s slave, let it be with me according to your word”? Can you, like Mary, let the Christ Child be born in your heart, and then in your life? Will you let your personal life be turned upside down by the forgiveness and the leadership of the Lord? And will you be part of a whole

community that is turned upside down by the justice and the mercy of the Lord? If you will, then blessed are you!

-- Douglas E. Murray