

LOVE BREAKS DOWN WALLS

Luke 1: 39-56 (the Magnificat); Isaiah 9:2-7 and Luke 2:1-7

This advent light candles for hope, peace, joy and now love.

Each of these familiar Christmas words can be lessened into words that are about us feeling nice.

Hope -a feeling of optimism

Peace -a feeling of calmness and tranquility

Joy -a feeling of happiness

Each week we were challenged with how these words can become verbs, actions that we live out.

active rather than passive words.

Hope -as an action to prove that we believe a better world is possible

Peace -as an action that right relations with others is achievable

Joy -as an action of justice that all people, in all places feel.

Today's word is LOVE.

Let's begin with the scripture. The Magnificat -Mary's Song. A familiar passage, that has been sung and recited since the very beginning of the Christian Church. When researching Mary's song there is so much information to wade through, endless numbers of books, articles, blogs and sermons. It was hard to know where to start and where to go. Every denomination had things to say about Mary. How to give light to Mary's powerful prophetic words, without belittling Mary's role to that of a vessel of holy childbirth.

I have a distinct memory of when I was in grade 7 or so, sitting in the sunken living room (with brown carpet and brown paneled walls) of my friend from school Anne Chambers. She was a Catholic, I was Mennonite living in an area heavily populated by Mennonites. She was the only person I knew who was Catholic, and we had got talking about church. Somehow, I had come to my own conclusions about Catholicism: I had come to understand that Catholics were very close to being Christian, but not under the umbrella of Christianity; and they worshipped Mary instead of Jesus. In this memory of mine, I remember Anne explaining to me that Catholics were also Christian, and that they had a different reverence of Mary, they didn't worship her, they worshipped Jesus -just like me. I remember the feeling of "wow, how had I got it so wrong?" and a little embarrassment, glad I hadn't shared my thoughts on this topic to others.

As a Mennonite, we don't give much wordplay to Mary. We let her have her moment here, at Christmas, to be this miracle mother, the immaculate conception, the submissive woman, peaceful, "away in a manger -no crying he makes" kind of mother.

That's it. Next week we move on. There're still shepherds and wise men to meet in this story.

So, who is this Mary? This is her longest speech, and so much of the Christian world hold her in great honour. So what has she done here?

The traditional look at Mary, portrays Mary as a woman who hears her call to service, and willingly obeys, not only obeys but praises God for her role in the plan, her body is s a vessel to deliver the Son of God.

Especially in the Catholic tradition, there is much veneration of Mary, and in the past 50 years (since Vatican II) there has been a new reclaiming of Mary.

For centuries Mary has been “feminine perfection personified.” The perfect woman who is both mother and virgin. As virgin, Mary is portrayed as disembodied from her female sexuality. As mother, she is submissive to her husband and beholden to her child. Motherhood, traditionally, is the fulfillment of a woman’s life, yet virginity is a more prized virtue, according to the Catholic priesthood. This glorification of Mary’s virginal motherhood presents women with an “impossible dream.” Women are caught betwixt and between. Only Mary—and Mary alone—could manage such a combination.¹

If Mary’s song is merely a passive, humble submission to God’s will, then we may as well breeze through it and move on to the rest of the story. We may as well, pat Mary on the back and say well done, and carry on to the next characters.

In Mary’s Magnificat, she spends the first 3 out of 9 verses praising God for using her as God’s humble servant, but the other 6 verses Mary shares her prophetic message both of how God is going to work in the future and as Gods has worked in the past.

Mary’s song was not merely a passive act but the radical decision of a young woman willing to risk her life on a messianic venture; hers was a free and active consent. Mary’s *song* is a joyful prayer of love and cooperation. Like her Son, who “took the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:7), Mary was a “servant” only of the Lord (Luke 1:38).

This song is a woman’s song, first originating in the scriptures in the voice of Hannah, that is neither glib or naïve. Mary is a poor marginalized woman, and in this song, she brings voice to a world as it was and as it is, radically unequal, stratified, violent, and still able to claim the possibility of transformation.

Vs 51b-53 “He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thought. He has bought rulers from their thrones and has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.”

The Magnificat is a woman's song of confidence; a bold song of liberation, where their powers of this world are turned around upside down.

There's a familiar Christmas tune that goes "Mary did you know...? That your son would heal the lame, etc. And if whoever wrote that song would have read Mary's anthem hear, they wouldn't have wrote the song, because: Yes Mary Knows* She knows all too well. Mary, is so confident in what God will do (establishing a Kingdom of Justice and Peace) that the future vision of the kingdom here, is described in the past tense.

Mary's song is a bold and courageous prophetic song, but maybe it was also a lullaby. I imagine Mary singing this song to little Jesus. Later when Jesus begins in public ministry just a few chapters later, he sings out her song

4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me... to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and to release the oppressed."

Mary's boy Child sings like his Mother. He knew what good news would look like for her, and he proclaimed it.

Seeing Mary's confident proclamation maybe changes the picture of the quiet, humble Mary a little. The picture of a poor, lowly teenage mother (probably dressed in light blue), traveling with her new husband, and a lone donkey to the small city of Bethlehem where there is no place for them to stay and so they set up home in a barn, with the animals. The three of the -Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, alone in a barn, with shepherds and wise kings on route to make their visits.

If I may, I want to repaint that picture a bit more for you with some additional knowledge from a biblical scholar John W Schoenheit. ⁱⁱ He says that to fully understand this story we need to glean knowledge from Greek texts and the ancient Middle Eastern culture.

"What we will see as we examine the biblical record from both the Greek text and the culture of the times is that Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem some time before she gave birth and were taken into the home of a local resident, likely a relative who was also of the family of David, in whose home Mary gave birth."

So where does this whole “no room in the inn” bit come from? It is from a phrase that has been both mistranslated and misinterpreted, besides that fact that since they were from this town, there was mostly likely an even distant relative to take them in, or given the fact that hospitality was a very important cultural value, someone would have taken this pregnant woman into their home.

But it says there was no room in the inn, it says. Or does it? The word “room” in the Greek actually means space, not hotel room. THERE WAS NO SPACE FOR THEM.

And the word “inn” is actually just mistranslated. There are many places in the NT where there is mention of a guest room and hotel room, and these are two distinct words. Hotel room refers to a paid lodging, and guest room refers to a spare room inside one’s house reserved for guests. The word that is used in Mary’s birth story is guest room.

To help us understand that, let’s look at what the cultural norm was at the time. Back then “it was quite common for houses in the Middle East to have a guest room where guests, and even strangers, could stay.

Showing hospitality to strangers has always been a huge part of Eastern life, and is written about in the Bible. Even poor people could have a guest room because it did not have to be furnished or have an adjoining bathroom and shower. People did not generally sleep on beds, but traveled with their own blankets that they slept on at night, so sleeping arrangements were no problem. Tables and chairs were not used in the common homes of first century Palestinians, and the bathroom was a pot, or a place outside. So the average guest room was simply a small, empty room, offering shelter and a place of safety.

The guest room provided privacy for the guests as well as the host family, because one-room homes were common. Our modern houses with many rooms were simply not the norm in a village of the first century. Quite often a family lived in a one-room house, in which all family activities occurred. They pulled their bedrolls out at night and slept on the floor, and simply rolled them up again in the morning.

Another thing we must understand about houses in the East is that it was common for people to bring their animals, such as the family donkey, a couple of milk goats, or a cow or two, into the home at night. Such animals were very valuable, and the people brought them in at night to keep them from being stolen and to protect them from harm.

It was a common practice to raise the floor of the part of the house where the family lived, and keep the animals in an area that was a step or two lower.

So why do we assume Jesus was born in a stable? Jesus was laid in a manger, which is an open trough, box, or bin, where the animal food was placed so the animals could feed easily. In Western society, mangers are in barns or stables, so if Jesus was laid in a manger it made sense to us that he was born in a stable.

However, in Eastern society, where the animals grazed outside during the day and were brought into the house at night, the manger was in the house. Having the manger in the house kept the animals calm and contented in the tighter quarters of the house, just as many modern farm animals have a feeding trough in their stall stay calm and content.”

So to repaint the picture: There was no space left in the guest room (maybe because of the census or other events happening in town at that time), so therefore Mary gave birth in the main part of someone’s home, next to where the animals came in for night, and surrounded by the host family, their women and local midwives would have attended to Mary, while the men waited outside or at the neighbours for the birth to take place.

There is nothing wrong with the nativity story that we commonly picture, it fits with the Jesus-the-underdog narrative. Reimagining it this way doesn’t have to take away from our tradition, but rather add richness to the meaning of Christmas spirit.

“The story of the birth of Christ reveals what we today consider to be the true spirit of Christmas. Not people closing their hearts and homes to a couple in need, but rather people opening both their hearts and their homes, and joyfully giving to others in need and helping where they can.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The birth of Jesus, was probably a noisy occasion -not unlike some of the family gatherings that take place at Christmas. Jesus was welcomed into the world humbly, but surrounded by people who wanted to help a strong and confident young woman at her time of need.

A strong and confident woman with a powerful vision for the future. A woman inspired by God to not only do God's will but also to proclaim God's coming kingdom.

Mary sang a song of hope for the future, for God's kingdom taking hold on earth, but her song is also a challenge.

What does it mean for us, people with privileges and securities, that the lowly will be lifted up?

Good news for the poor... what does it mean for the comfortable?

How do we live into the turning of the world Mary speaks of, or even throw our weight forward and help God's turning? How do we know God's liberation is ultimately good for us all? How do we work towards a future we cannot see?

We can look around us and see that justice is possible. Our country is in a time of the kingdom turning. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and their 94 Calls to Action, point to a reconciled future. The commission of Murdered and Mission Aboriginal Women point to justice coming. The upcoming apology to the survivors of the 60's scoop points toward God's kingdom turning. The oppressed being lifted up.

How do we live into Mary's vision of the future? Elizabeth says (vs.45) that Mary is blessed because "she believes what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished." She is blessed not just because she believed that she would have a baby, but because she believed in God's plan with this baby to bring about a new kingdom where the rich are turned away empty and the humble lifted up.

It's essential that we grab on to the confident hope of Mary.

If we leave this song only on Mary's lips, and do not take it as our own, then who are we in this song? If we do not take Mary's song as our anthem as well, then our part in her song becomes the mighty that are brought down and the rich that are sent away empty. (That's not who I want to be in this vision.)

If we say that we want to be the humble who are lifted up, are our actions demonstrating that?

On a personal level, this may take form as a process of unlearning and relearning. I grew up in this country as a settler. And I grew up in an often-racist community, where the only Indigenous peoples I knew as a child were First Nations kids adopted into white homes or those suffering with addictions that I saw on the streets in the city. And I grew up with a school that failed to teach me about real history of colonization or the true contributions of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

As an adult, like many of you, I have been in a process of unlearning, and relearning. Many times, I have been deeply disturbed by the testimonies of humiliation, neglect and abuse that I have heard of the marginalized in Canadian society.

There are many areas in our world where the powerful have and are doing terrible things, not just in our settler-indigenous relations. There is climate change and environmental collapse. There are countless wars and violence to a variety of marginalized peoples. There is fear and even hatred of other cultures and beliefs, in particular towards Muslims.

By unlearning the misinformation and learning the truth; and by sharing what we have learned with our children, our friends, and really whoever will listen; we are living Mary's vision. Our actions can be an act of hope, lurching towards the future we can't yet see. Reconciliation (with Indigenous people, with Muslims, with the environment) will follow, not lead. Actions of hope lead the way to where reconciliation can happen.

I know I already preached the sermon on hope, (Donna-peace, Dan -justice). Today candle is for Love. (The scripture was taken from the lectionary, so maybe I or maybe God just wasn't done with this topic yet.)

Love toward our partners, our family, or our friends or the people we surround ourselves with is what we first think of when we think of love. And that love sometimes comes easily and sometimes we need to work a little harder at.

But that kind of love just didn't connect with the scriptures today. What connected was a deeper kind of love. A love that requires us to lift up the oppressed and to honour the poor? Like God did by choosing Mary, and Mary did by sharing her prophetic vision of God's kingdom?

What does that mean for us in our everyday lives?

Maybe it begins, by not saying the slightly distasteful racist joke at coffee time, or maybe it's calling out a friend who made the racist, or sexist or homophobic remark; not giving feet to the hatred that gets passed around on facebook. "The oppressed will be lifted up."

Maybe it's attending events of another culture, or learning to cook their food, or maybe it's reading through the 94 calls to action and seeing which one you could do (there are also condensed versions, including one put out by MCCan.)

Maybe it is sharing our wealth with the poor, our lives with the lonely.

Maybe it's attending a protest or writing letters to our MP's on behalf of the marginalized. (signs of both hope *and* love.)

When we feel weary in the slow coming of justice, when we feel scared and discouraged by unimaginable violence, we can claim the passion of Mary, of those whose confidence in the power of our transforming God knows no bounds. ^{iv}

We are here to help each other live out the impossible change of the resurrected Christ—Christ born again in our lives and hearts this Christmas season.

We are here to help each other hold on to the hope that is at the heart of reconciliation, because these actions of hope, these actions of peace, these actions of justice ARE actions of LOVE.

And as we try to love as God has taught us, might we say like Mary, with all our heart: "May it be done to me according to your word."

ⁱ <https://www.crisismagazine.com/1989/reconsidering-mary-feminist-criticism-deserves-a-response>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.truthortradition.com/articles/retelling-the-christmas-story>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} <https://www.kairoscanada.org/world-turn-sermon-luke-1-46-55>

*Parts of the sermon were taken from parts of the above articles.