



This may just further reveal a bit of church nerdiness on my part, but there are other worships I watch online come Sunday evening or after: the congregation where I grew up in northwest Ohio, the church I served with during my year of seminary internship, even the Washington National Cathedral from time to time, just for fun. So, for the one where I went for Sunday school and confirmation among other things, the pastor there is on a sabbatical. Standard operating procedure is you line up all the worship

leaders and preachers ahead of time, and before he left there was this invitation extended to the congregation for people who wouldn't mind sharing their personal faith story for the sermon slot that respective Sunday morning.

As we have been sharing here in our newsletter and announcement pages, this has been a rather insistent push by our wider church of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, because we are starting to notice this trend in faith wonderers and church-seekers. Yes, they want the stories from thousands of years ago, but they are also yearning to hear such holy accounts going on today: as if Christ might still be risen indeed. They are craving to hear how God is still just as active today as when a young teenage girl brought the hope to further life in a Christ child long ago.

So, last Sunday, a young woman stood at that pulpit for the 2nd week in a row. She did the more Biblical, historical context, scholarly research background sermon the week before. But then she felt this sacred nudge from God to share her story, because it just might reel in others to believe as if their story might just have some sacredness, too. Several years before, she attended a Christian university, and graduated with a degree in theology. She, then, returned to her home church, started a Bible study, felt this enthusiasm and purpose in her newfound calling; but that also brought along questions of what more could be done there, leading to (heaven-forbid!) ideas for further ministry to enacted. So, she met with what was called the board of that parish, our council equivalent, and she said it went "disastrously." She was told she was too "ambitious," and that she should go down to the children's ministry, and learn from the women where she belonged. Granted, that is an incredibly important part of any church's ministry, but it was not where she felt called, and it was, quite simply, said in a rather...not-so-pleasant tone: that this young naïve girl should know her place. She left the church, ashamed, feeling guilt, as if she had messed up in following such a path believing that God was empowering her gifts to magnify the Lord.

So, it's only perfectly fitting that Mary gets brought front and center this weekend in the church, who, for this particular celebration of her, is referred to as Mary, Mother of Our Lord. All well and good, but Mary also had an impact before the holy night in Bethlehem. Mary has the audacity to know that her place was not limited to where others insisted. Mary dares to believe that the God of the universal heights, may just lift her up beyond what others could ever imagine. Mary has the nerve to be convinced that all along, this God has not only been concerned about internal spiritual and eternal soul-keeping, but to ensure that all of God's children have enough food to eat, to work for actual peace and wholeness around the world, to put the high-and-mighty in their respective needed humble place, and lift up those they always looked down upon in return. Mary has the holy audacity to not only believe it, because that's what she actually heard from the prophets; to not only believe it, but to say it out loud to a world that was not always ready to hear from a teenage girl. Mary has an impact to be made even before the holy night in Bethlehem. That this soon-to-be in the flesh Messiah wasn't just about soul-health, but to tend to the entire well-being of each child of God, as if they would be worth dying and rising for soon enough.

So, yes, this weekend is meant to be about Mary, and the very work of God in her, but I have this feeling that Mary would insist, as she did in the treasured Magnificat that we just heard and will also sing here shortly: Mary would insist on not forgetting about those looked down upon. Mary would insist not forgetting about the young woman who was brave enough to share her story last weekend, including a part when the church tried to supposedly put her in her place. Thankfully, she eventually found a different community of faith who might have had the nerve to believe in a different uplifting tone to the Gospel.

Yes, we in the Lutheran church have made some progress over the recent decades in not only including, but empowering women in ministry, and we have been tremendously all the better for it. Last fall, we in the ELCA celebrated the 55th anniversary when our predecessor church body ordained the first female in our faith tradition. And of the 65 geographical synods spread throughout our denomination, over half are now led by women serving as their Bishop. Progress has been made for sure, but we are still called to proclaim the ultimate Gospel of hope and unconditional love and a life-altering empowerment that was so beautifully sung by Mary herself:

we are called to ensure that if a young girl is told otherwise, that we have a different holy story to tell.

It just so happened that several years after that disastrous board meeting, that young woman was invited by her grandmother to a Christmas Eve service, oddly enough: the celebration of the holy night in Bethlehem that Mary helped usher in a most breath-taking boundless love for the world. It was at that worship, where an open invitation was extended to the Communion table, but in the recent years, she had developed this gluten-intolerance, in which not every church can accommodate; but thankfully this one could. She was hesitant at first. She hadn't taken Communion for years. But maybe Mary helped reel her in that night, and the Christ child right along with her. She was brought down by the church, but Christ insisted on lifting her up anyway, because the grace of Jesus Christ from Bethlehem to Calvary to the empty tomb to every Communion table: grace will always win out. So, for Mary, and all the faithful women who have the audacity to believe in the Gospel, thanks be to God, indeed! Amen!