



“Outside the Box”

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December 23, 2018

Scripture (NRSV):

Luke 1:39-55

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be ^[a] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of this servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, the Mighty One whose name is holy.

⁵⁰ God’s mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation.

⁵¹ God has shown great strength; scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ God has helped servant Israel, in remembrance of God’s mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants forever.”

Sermon:

Mary was an impossible ideal, growing up as a Roman Catholic girl.
Yet we were taught she was our role model.

Virgin, and mother!

Obedient, to God.

Young, married to an older man.

Quiet, and pretty.

And patient...

Basically, all the things I was not when I was growing up and that one thing, the virgin mother...simply impossible!

I wonder now, what were we girls looking at when we looked at her?

I'm not sure we ever saw this Mary, but instead, we saw endless icons, and statues of a soft eyed girl in blue, and heard and said, lots of pious prayers.

But if we truly LOOK at her, if we truly LISTEN to this text today, then we have an opportunity to be surprised, and awed, and impressed at the daring of this young woman, at her loud voice, her audacity and her hope.

She goes off to be with her elderly cousin Elizabeth, who will surely need all the support of friends and family, carrying her first child in her old age. What doctors would call, "a high-risk pregnancy" to be sure!

Mary goes to her to support her, encourage her, keep her on bed rest, if necessary!

She knows what is needed and she does it! I like that!

Then, she sings, shouts, prays her audacious hope, her hymn of praise and possibility that lies with God.

I can't imagine anyone within earshot of her song, not being thrilled and uplifted by her courageous and hope-filled words! Listen to her!

She sings in excitement at her own life and future...God looking on her with favor, with blessing and love.

She sings even more, in the pattern of the prophets of her people; she sounds like them, she is like them in the power of her speech, bursting forth like theirs, a messenger of God, like them.

Mary, the prophet of God.

She sings of the Mighty One, whose name is holy and who shows great strength; strength used to help the lowly, the little ones, the unseen, unnoticed ones.

The Mighty One who scatters the proud, topples the powerful from their thrones, to lift up the lowly and the oppressed.

Who feeds the hungry, and turns the tables on those who believe they can take it all, all for themselves!

Not one starving person will be left out, not one in need will be overlooked! Not in the economy of God!

Mary sees it, feels it, and shouts it out as audacious truth and encouragement!

I believe that this song of hers is but one of the first of her prophetic announcements; I imagine she teaches her little boy about God's powerful arm, God's healing plan, God's design for restoration of humanity, and the healing of all woe!

Did I see this in Mary then, when I was a restless teenager?

I did not.

I felt only that I was being boxed in by the rules, the hierarchy, the oppression I felt in the church of my youth.

I did not see this young woman, bursting out of her social expectations, singing her song of freedom and hope and triumph. Not right away.

She had been boxed in by too many gilded picture frames, too many mangled messages of quietness and subservience that had nothing to do with the text you hear today, and everything to do with social control of women in that religious community in which I was raised.

Now we, we are the United Church of Christ, and we pride ourselves on being a church that celebrates human diversity, and freedom, and the joy and welcome of God. This church of ours should know this young woman very well!

We should, but we often miss her, as clearly as I did years ago.

We should not gloss over Mary, the mother of Jesus!

We should celebrate her hope-filled song. Her strong voice, her courage, her assurance of God's blessing upon her, and upon her whole world.

Let's strip Mary of the protestant pre-conceptions: that she is a "popish" fiction, a "high church" ornament on side altars of old cathedrals or Baroque churches.

She is a prophet, a rebel, a joyous visionary, and a girl. A woman.
A model for girls and women everywhere!

Not quiet, not subservient. Not a flat picture in a gilded frame, but a brave young woman, filled with love of God and hope for the world.

Who taught her little son to love God and hope for the world.

There is not a lot about Mary in the Gospels, but let her out of the box, and look at her! Look at her witness, and that of her friends. Look at the vision, the hope, the full humanity and the courage in her life, that she witnesses for our lives.

Don't leave her as a pious footnote, and certainly, don't say she "belongs" to the catholic churches of east and west!

Mary is the first of the New Testament women to embrace the radical message of Jesus!

Isn't that wonderful? And powerful? And awe inspiring?
For us, for girls and women everywhere?

Give thanks for the prophetic words of Mary, and may they uplift you today and every day, inspiring you with her courage, her hope, her determination to see God's will be done!

Alleluia! Amen.