

It has been said before: There is something about Mary. The mother of Jesus has captured the attention of people's hearts the world over. There are some places where people seem to worship Mary with special processions that include a statue of Mary dressed in special clothing and wreathed in fresh flowers. There are even prayers a person can pray to Mary, the most well-known is the rosary, where Mary is asked to pray to God on our behalf. All this kind of attention to Mary can make some uncomfortable, it certainly has in the past, so much so that in some denominations Mary and her role has been downplayed.

Mary is often featured in hymns, especially Christmas hymns, where she is portrayed as being meek and mild, quiet, and obedient. So much so that when it comes to the annual tradition many churches have of holding Christmas pageants where children act out the story of Jesus' birth, some girls have said they did not want to play the role of Mary. The reasons given were she was too perfect, and they could not relate to her, others said she was boring.

Growing up in the Episcopal Church, this is something I confess I cannot relate to, not wanting to play Mary in the church pageant. Sure, it was a silent role, but then, so were all the other characters, the only one who got to speak in the pageants I was ever in was the narrator. In my parish, the role of Mary was coveted by all the girls, and it was traditionally the eldest girl in Sunday school – the one who was almost a teenager- who got to play Mary. I still remember how important that role was, and the year I got to play Mary and how the opportunity to portray her gave me a deeper insight into the young woman who said yes to God and how that is something that impacts many people who follow Jesus today.

We sang all the same hymns about Mary in my parish growing up, but in Sunday school and in sermons given by our priests we were never told Mary was submissive, as many interpret her story. When Mary said yes to the Angel Gabriel, she was doing something brave, something powerful, and was showing us what obedience to God looks like. There is nothing meek nor mild about such obedience. Mary was a radical, like many Old Testament prophets before her, and we never forgot it. Mary shows us how to live what we believe, how to practice what we preach, and that saying yes to God is not a one-time event, it is something we must do every day.

At first glance, this morning's Gospel reading about two extraordinary women of the Bible might seem a relief after hearing about John the Baptist for the past two Sundays, and might finally feel more like Christmas is coming soon. But when we look closer, Elizabeth and Mary have quite a lot in common with the prophets of old who point us not just to the joy of the Celebration of Christmas we are preparing for but to what it means that God is coming into the world.

First, we have Elizabeth, the wife of Zachariah a priest of fairly high ranking. Elizabeth we are told earlier in Luke's Gospel, came from an important lineage, and her marriage to Zachariah would have been seen as important and right. Earlier in Luke's Gospel the author said both Elizabeth and her husband were righteous before God, despite her not being able to have children. In the Old Testament infertility was not seen as a biological issue, it was a theological issue. Children were seen as a blessing, and the weight of that blessing was born by the woman not just physically, but theologically. The inability to have a child was seen as a curse, evidence that the woman was not in favor with God. Even worse, a marriage that did not produce children could be seen as a marriage God did not approve of.

Of course, now we know that these interpretations are not correct, children are not evidence of a God approved union, children are human beings loved by God. And the section of the Gospel we just heard is part of how that theological mindset changed. For Elizabeth who had been unable to give birth but was full of the life of believing and obeying God, did become pregnant when she was considered too old by the same people who said she was not good enough because she never had children. The important child Elizabeth will give birth to isn't the essential part of today's Gospel. Today, it is Elizabeth who remained faithful to God despite even the religious telling her she wasn't good enough that is important. By staying faithful, Elizabeth was able to recognize the Presence of God when Mary came to visit her. Scholars tell us Elizabeth is the very first person in Luke's Gospel to acknowledge who Jesus is when she calls Mary "the mother of my Lord." There is nothing meek nor mild about that awareness. We also heard that Elizabeth was then filled with the Holy Spirit, which is pretty amazing considering the descent of the Holy Spirit on the followers of Jesus gathered in an upper room after his ascension is still many years away in. Elizabeth sounds like a pretty impressive woman, one with a remarkable relationship with God.

Which might be why Mary went to visit her after her own remarkable encounter with an angel. There are lots of people from scholars to commentators to preachers to lay readers who have lots of suggestions as to why Mary went with haste, with speed, to see her cousin. Maybe she was scared, maybe she had to get of town to avoid stoning, maybe she needed a friend, or maybe she was so happy she needed to be

with the only other person who could understand her happiness. The author of Luke doesn't tell us why Mary went to visit Elizabeth, but by including this visit in this Gospel, the author does show us how important women are in the story of salvation. God did indeed become Incarnate, became one of us and lived as one of us with us, died as one of us, and rose to new life, and today we remember that Incarnation was in no way isolated from the humanity God came to be part of. Both men and women were participants in that Incarnation. Such participation is not meek nor mild. It is bold. It is beautiful. And it is what obedience to God looks like.

One of the reasons I suspect so many little girls did not want to play Mary in the church pageants is because we human beings have trouble understanding the word obedience. We seem to think it means a sort of blind loyalty, a mindless doing whatever one is told. I've known several people who tell me they believe they are called to be priests or deacons but will not enter the ordination process because they do not want to take a vow to be obedient to a bishop, which is one of the vows clergy take when we are ordained. I wonder if we sometimes interpret obedience as unnecessarily sacrificing ourselves to something or someone, like the church. But the definition of the word obedience is not mindless loyalty; it doesn't mean doing what you are told. The word obedience means to listen. Obedience requires paying attention, discerning. As a priest, I definitely need to pay attention and listen to the bishop, but if the bishop were to tell me to do something that doesn't fit with the rest of my vows, or with the love of God in Christ, I would not have to do it, because my obedience is first and foremost to God. That obedience is what we see in Elizabeth and in Mary, which may be another reason these two women got together in today's Gospel.

Obedience to God is what Mary shows us so powerfully in the song she sang in today's Gospel. Although we sang her powerful song called the Magnificat as a response to the Old Testament lesson, but its place in Luke's Gospel is in today's reading. A lot of scholars like to point out is based on the song of Hannah from 1 Samuel, and there are some similarities and that makes a quite good Bible study. Many contemporary scholars and commentators like to point out how radical her song is, how it celebrates what God is going to do, how the powerful will be brought down, the hungry fed, and rich sent away empty. However, I prefer to remind us all of something that was quite powerful to me back when I was in seminary studying Greek. And it all has to do with tense. Verb tense. You see, in Greek, the portion of Mary's song that talks about how God has shown strength, has scattered the proud, has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich away empty and fulfilled God's promise to Israel, all these things, in the original Greek are not in the past tense. They are in the past perfect tense. That

means all these things are not just done they are done and over with. Mary's song proclaims that all these things have already happened, God's Kingdom is already present. That is pretty radical. Especially because in Mary's day there was plenty of poverty and injustice, just as we have today.

Mary's proclamation of God being with us means we don't have to follow the status quo any more. We don't have to do believe things like infertility or wealth or prestige has anything to do with God's favor, nor do we have to buy into the concept that women are good only if they are quiet, or of value only if they have children, and we don't have to believe being obedient means doing whatever we are told by a person in power. Mary's song shows being obedient to God means living trusting God's Kingdom is the ultimate reality, one already accomplished. So we can stand up to the status quo. We can respond to injustice by living what we believe instead of just being angry and telling everyone we are angry. We don't have to perpetuate abuse and can break free from abusive systems. Such living takes a lot of courage, because not everyone is going to agree or want such a reality to be acknowledged or lived into. But that doesn't have to stop us.

There really is something about Mary. In these final days of Advent, perhaps Elizabeth and Mary are the kind of prophets we need; not because they offer maternal comfort, but because they remind us of what it means to say yes to God, and that can be encouraging whenever we feel alone or afraid, or disheartened, or tempted to follow the path of anger or revenge. They remind us obedience means getting ourselves out of God's way and making room for God's Kingdom in us. Because God has already set things right, and we can live into that kingdom way right here and right now, with the belief that one day this reality will be known by everyone.