

Luke 1:39-55

The text for the sermon comes from Mary's song:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is God's name.”

Words are powerful things. Remember last week when I talked about the angry John the Baptist calling the people a brood of vipers, demanding who warned them to flee from the wrath to come? Those are stirring and disturbing words.

Words have the power to change us and shape us in all kinds of ways. I learned this early on. I learned this from the words of hymns and the words of the Bible and the words of poems that Mrs. Lord, my second grade teacher, taught us to memorize, poems I still have by heart (and how I love it that when we memorize words we call it “knowing them ‘by heart’”).

I learned the importance of words through prayers. As a child, on the nights my mother tucked me into bed I would say two prayers, “Jesus, Tender shepherd, hear me” and the Lord's prayer. But on the nights my father tucked me in, I would say those three—those two and an additional one that went like this: *Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God please pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

My dad didn't say “please” nor did any of his fellow Catholics when they said the prayer during Mass. I added the “please” to the prayer all by myself. It just seemed wrong to command someone to pray for you. And besides, things always seem to go more smoothly with good manners.

My dad never said much about my addition to the prayer. He didn't say much about Mary, either. Or God, either, for that matter. And God knows we didn't talk about Mary in the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church. All I knew was that we weren't supposed to pray to anybody but God. The Catholics—like my father--prayed to saints. We Lutherans apparently enjoyed a much more direct connection. *God heard Lutherans.*

Over the years I dropped my prayer to Mary. I dropped Mary, more or less, seeing her as the mere bearer of the infinite, but not infinite in and of herself.

But then somewhere along the line—say, maybe in my fourth month of pregnancy with my oldest daughter, Madeleine, as we were putting up the tree and I was just beginning to wear my brand-new maternity clothes, the *bearer* of the infinite began to seem awfully interesting.

She could have said no, you know. Mary could have just said no. But just as John the Baptist called his followers vipers and accused them of fleeing from the wrath they deserve, in Mary's response to Gabriel, we have another potent example of the vast power of words. Everybody searches, in times of difficulty and challenge, for the right words. Everybody works to avoid a failure of communication.

And Mary—talking to an angel, searching for the right words--Mary simply said yes. Mary said, according to St. Luke's gospel "Here am I. Let it be with me according to your word."

She said to that nervous, overburdened angel Gabriel, *we'll go with what you're telling me. I'll take your word on this. I'll take the Word into my body where it will become not the ghost of an idea, but the flesh of a child. I'll take the Word into my body where it will not become a Word any longer, but a Deed. A Deed and a Savior.*

That is how, I believe, Mary chose not to flee the wrath to come. You know how I feel about John the Baptist, how I'd prefer it if he'd just clean up, take a Valium and get off all our backs. Still, John is right, of course. We do cower in fear and we do seek to flee because we fear the wrath our sin can incur. So John speaks to humanity in general and across the board John speaks and the pattern of human behavior is duly noted, duly confirmed.

But Mary responds to Gabriel in particular and when she speaks, the world is changed. The word is made not only flesh as we say so easily, so suavely, forgetting just exactly what that means which is the word is made into deed and love comes alive. Mary gives her body as a home for Jesus so that, in the fullness of time, Jesus gives his body that we might find a home in God.

With a soulfulness that I think we can't help but admire, Mary says yes to God and she puts her trust in God. She is willing to depend on God. But with her agreement, she is also saying that she will let God put God's trust in her—and bear the Christ child into the world. The word is made deed by God's word and by Mary's word, as well. It's a kind of contract, isn't it, between God and Mary. A covenant we call it in church, a deal struck, a willing partnership.

Mary gets to give birth to the wonderful counselor, the mighty God, the prince of peace. Mary gets to give birth to love.

And because of that, so do we.

You see, I think that Christmas isn't a grand mystery. Nor is it an occasion for us stuffy church types to only decry commercialism and mourn the secularism of what has become such a noisy holiday.

Rather, Christmas is something smaller, more local, more real and relevant for our lives than a staggering mystery. The British poet, W.H. Auden writes, “The choice to love is open till we die.” The choice—and the chance—to love, to making loving words loving deeds, is always ours.

Of course, the choice to flee from the wrath we fear to come is also always ours, as well. The choice to flee. But why? Why flee? Why, when the word of love is made deed, is made alive in a baby, by the word of God and the word of Mary.

*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*

So the story of the birth of Jesus cannot be separated from the story of Mary’s having born him, suckled him, loved him—these acts of desperate love and trust that show us how we should stand in relationship to God: responsive, willing, gentle and terrifically courageous.

And that is what, to me, is the most profound thing about Christmas—that it’s so magnificently risky. God relying on human love. That’s thinking outside the box. That’s making a leap of faith. That is the tender-hearted God trusting that, amidst the hard-heartedness of so many people, there would still be some tender-hearted fools willing to risk their love and their trust, willing to say *let it be with me according to your word.*

God must have been imagining that there were others, like Mary, perplexed and clearly not in charge of her life, who still could embrace the idea that love lives and breathes and saves and that we are privileged—even if we don’t understand all the whys and wherefores of it—to embrace it with our own brimming hearts.

And so whatever else you want to say about Christmas—whether you carp about is secularization or whether you question the veracity of Mary’s virginity or telekinetic star or whether you bemoan the uselessness of the gifts the three allegedly wise men brought to a baby, one thing is for sure: there was a birth. There was a deed. The Word was word no more, but real and living.

And the choice to love is open till we die.

For the word made flesh, for love made deed, let God’s people say Amen.