

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

December 20, 2009

Rev. Roger Rapp

Worship Theme: Singing Mary's Song

Luke 1:46-55

Last Sunday, I was sitting in Maida Wedell's class on medieval Christian art. We were looking at pictures of the stained glass windows that she and her husband Eric took of the awesome Chartres cathedral in France.

This incredible structure, built between 1194 and 1224, is 785 years old and still stands as a marvelous witness to the Christian faith. Looking at one of the many beautiful stained glass windows was the image of a mother holding her child. I suspect that many who view that image think it is of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her son.

But thanks to Maida, she pointed out that the image of the mother and her child was a depiction of St. Anne, the mother of Mary, and her daughter, Mary, who of course is the mother of our Lord. This beautiful image was the first time I had ever seen a work of art showing the mother of Jesus as a child, being held by her own mother. Like so many art images in the Middle Ages, the stained glass windows, the carved stone images, and the scenes that are placed throughout the cathedral are teaching tools for a population, who for the most part could not read or write.

On this, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, unlike the world around us, who have been singing Christmas carols since before Thanksgiving, we focus today on Mary, the mother of our Lord. Our text in Luke that we just heard as our Gospel reading brings us the beautiful verses of Mary's Song of Praise, when she discovers that she is to give birth to the Messiah. It is also referred to as "The Magnificat" appearing only in Luke's gospel.

For those of us in the reformed tradition (i.e. Presbyterian and Lutheran) we don't worship Mary. When we think of Mary, oftentimes our images come from the Madonna image of our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers. The New Testament doesn't have her appearing very often.

St. Paul thinks it was worth remarking that Jesus was "born of a woman" but Paul never mentions her name. But Luke does remember...and the song that Mary sings in today's gospel reading is a cherished treasure of the church. In Mary's song, she tells of her savior, who "has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant". Lowliness...the Greek word for lowliness in this reading is not simply talking about humility, but also about poverty. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was poor. Dirt poor. And not only poor, but pregnant. And not only pregnant, but unmarried. Her state was of unimaginable hopelessness, especially in that ancient time. In today's context we might think of a teen mother in a homeless shelter.

It is challenging for us to imagine Mary, after over 2000 years of glorification and for some, deification, as a humble human being.

Yet this unlikely teen mother sings....and she sings a song of freedom, not only for herself, but for all who are rejected, hopeless, and despised of the earth. For all those who don't have a nice comfortable place to go for the holidays. For all those who, in their poverty and wretchedness, still believe that God will make a way where there is no way. Like one of my

favorite African American spirituals on a CD that my son gave me many years ago: “The Lord will make a way.”

Mary sings of a God who has scattered the proud and self satisfied...and who fills the hungry with good things.

Where do we hear Mary’s song? Could the song of Mary be heard in the clanging of the Salvation Army bells, with their constant reminder to those with plenty, that there are those who are blessed, even in their poverty? Could the song of Mary be heard in the hearts of those who are despised and rejected by the world, like the main character in the film “Precious” , an abused, pregnant teen mother in Harlem, who somehow carries a hope in her heart that her life is of some worth, against all evidence to the contrary?

Could the song of Mary be heard in the lives of the homeless, like those we house every six or seven weeks in the Cheyenne Interfaith Hospitality Network?

Can Mary’s song be our song, when we are impoverished in spirit in the midst of our material wealth? Can Mary’s song bear witness to the God who overturns the way the world works, who elects the least and the last to the front of the line, who reverses the orders of society and people that we work so hard to avoid, and not really see?

If I am going to sing Mary’s song, I will need her help. She will have to make me rethink how the wondrous and incredible Spirit of God dwells, sometimes in places we most want to avoid.

If I am going to sing Mary’s song, I need to remember that the Holy Spirit who visited that pregnant, peasant woman in a little insignificant town of

Nazareth centuries ago is the same God that raises a voice in people that we have dismissed as having no voice.

Mary's song resonates with a ray of hope and deliverance...almost like a falling star frozen in space..reminding that the Spirit is still alive and working in the world as we know it.

This Advent, the song of Mary is a song we can sing, because there are times when God has plans for us that we never had imagined. For instance, last year, when I retired after 11 years of service at St. Paul's Lutheran Church here in Cheyenne, on my last Sunday, a wise senior member said to me in the receiving line, "God isn't through with you yet." Somehow her words stuck with me, and I now know what she was referring to. Neither one of us knew it at the time, but it has come to pass that my wife Mary, and I, have been blessed to a part of this congregation since May of this year. So you just never know what God is up to in our lives!

Yet, as we teeter on the brink of Christmas, we also acknowledge the proximity of this day to the longest night of the year, and the pervasive sadness that goes with this time of year with so many who are locked out of the joys and celebrations going on all around them.

Mary's song breaks forth and is born out of what would seem to be God's absence or even punishment. Those who long for a world that is yet to be...whether they sit in pews, or in the quiet solitude of a park bench, or in the middle of a brightly decorated living room, complete with garland, tinsel, and packages under the tree.....might resonate with the very present sense of longing in today's readings.

Today, the last time we gather this year before the celebration of the Nativity of our Lord, we sing Mary's song; we wait for the Spirit to move.

And we get ready...and we sing, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."

When we sing Mary's song, and when we are unsure about the path on which God seems to be guiding us, we can look back on the way God has brought us so far. Then we can see that God leads us to times and places we cannot know. But of this we can be sure even in the midst of questions and of our fears: The Holy One who visited Mary, and gave her the energy and hope to break into song....that same Holy One visits us in our godforsakeness with the surprise and delight of images that illustrate Mary's song. Like the beautiful windows of Chartres cathedral, or the beautiful windows of First Presbyterian church, the song and the spirit of the living God shines through!

Amen...and Amen.