

Dare to Imagine Love

Luke 1:39-55

Advent Week 4

Good Morning Church Family and good morning to those of you who are joining us online today. Today marks the fourth Sunday of Advent and we are a mere six days away from Christmas. An eternity, or so my children tell me. This morning, we lit the Love Candle to signify the love that came to us in the incarnational God, the one who put on flesh, whose Spirit dwelled within a physical body, just as we do here this morning.

I begin this morning with a question, when you think about your body, what do you feel? What words come to mind? Many people, if not most people, have a somewhat complicated relationship with their body. For some, their body is a source of pain, physical or emotional. For some a source of joy, bodies can be beloved. A source of disdain, of a lack of cooperation, a lack of conforming to prescribed beauty standards. "Just lose a few pounds!" "I can't leave the house without putting my face on." For others, their body a pragmatic tool- it allows them to work, to do the things that bring a sense of fulfillment. Still for others, bodies are a means to an end, bodies should behave in a certain way, work as expected.

Our text for this morning which Peter read for tells the story of Mary and Elizabeth's encounter following Mary's consent to the Angel Gabriel that she will bear the son of God. The person of Mary has been thought of in many different ways throughout church history. Mary as a young virgin woman, the picture of meekness, silence and humility. Quietly doing the bidding the God, ready to obey the commands put forth. There's also the image of Mary as a revolutionary figure, a bold voice crying out against the oppressive forces. Mary's Song found in Luke 1:46-55 was banned from worship in some churches throughout history for fear that it would stir up dissent among the poor, against the government. As with most things, the truth about Mary likely falls somewhere in the middle. A young woman, who was obedient to God, a woman who used her voice and her means to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven, a kingdom that would bless and lift up the poor and lowly was coming near.

This morning, I'd like to us to think of another dimension of Mary: as a body. A point of clarification here, God didn't "use" Mary's body as a means to end. She was not simply a empty womb, a vessel to be filled with a child. That is not how God or scripture speak about bodies. God created human beings, male and female, body, mind and soul and pronounced them "good." So, when I say consider Mary as body, I mean think of her physicality, her flesh and blood-ness if you will as we consider our text for this morning.

So, in our text for this morning, Mary has just had her conversation with the Angel Gabriel about her becoming pregnant and giving birth to Jesus. He tells her that her cousin, Elizabeth, is pregnant even in her old age, and despite infertility. Nothing is

impossible for God. In verse 38, Mary tells the Angel, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Mary consents, Mary makes a choice about her body, and her own agency. Notice that scripture records Mary’s response to Gabriel. It didn’t simply move to “and then it happened.”, Mary chooses. I think this says something significant about God and our relationship to own bodies.

I’m going to read our text again, and let’s note all the physicality in this story. “In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

This passage is full of bodies and a real, on the ground, physicality. Mary set out. Went with haste. Enters the house, greets Elizabeth. Elizabeth hears the greetings and the still in utero baby leaps for joy. I imagine Mary’s voice, excited but also hesitant. Would Elizabeth really be great with child, as the Angel had proclaimed? Would this be the moment when she connects with someone who believes her divine conception, who understands the double miracle taking place in her body? It’s interesting that Elizabeth likely didn’t know that Mary was coming, based around her statement, “Why has the

mother of my Lord come to me?” Nor would have known that Mary was pregnant with Jesus. And yet, Elizabeth, KNOWS. Knows deep in her body. When she hears Mary’s greeting she experiences this moment joyful, Spirit-lead revelation all through her body -that familiar jolt of her loved one’s voice, The prince of peace, likely the size of an orange is entering her home. Praise be!

For a whole host of reasons, there are not many interactions between two women recorded in the Bible. Certainly they happened all the time, but they are not recorded. Yet the Bible records this one, again likely for a whole host of reasons. What do these women and their bodies have to teach us?

One of the reasons, I suspect, has to do with the intense physicality, the bodily awareness that comes along with women carrying children in their bodies. Childbearing and Childrearing are about as “in body” as it gets. For anyone who has given birth, attended a birth, or cared for small children knows this. The birth of my own kids, without going into too much detail, were so bodily that it was otherworldly. I remember how out of control of my own body I felt, the pain of unmedicated births, and the holiness of a warm, squirmy, wet newborn being placed on my chest. Any caregiver who has given a middle of the night bath from a poo explosion, who has held a weeping child in their arms, who has felt the visceral relief of hearing a newborn cry, knows the physicality of the human reality. And the story of Mary and Elizabeth and the baby boys in their wombs reminds us that God is there, in our bodies, in our aches and pains, in dry winter skin, in Our bodies are not something to be freed from, not a mortal coil, but

how God chose to make himself known to the world. Our bodies are still how God chooses to make himself known in our world.

Mary and Elizabeth have this beautiful interaction and shared connection, and the joy and relief that comes from that, Mary sings “her song”, what the church calls the Magnificat. And Mary[f] said,

“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.

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

for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.”

When I was researching for this sermon, I learned that Mary’s song is not the only one referred to as the Magnificat. There is one in the Old Testament- Hannah’s song. I won’t read it’s entirety, but the parallels between Mary and Hannah’s songs are numerous.

Hannah, you may remember, was one of two wives to a man named Elkanah. Hannah was unable to conceive, but Elkanah’s other wife, Peninnah, had many children. And she taunted Hannah mercilessly about that. During one annual family trip to the temple to offer their yearly sacrifice, Hannah weeps and prays that God will give her a child, and she vows that if God does, she will return him to the Lord’s service. The Lord hears her cry and grants her a Son, Samuel. Who becomes one of the mostly godly and just Prophets of Ancient Israel. Following the discovery of her pregnancy, Hannah sings HER magnificat. I’ll read a portion, this is 1 Samuel 2:1-2, “Hannah prayed and said,

“My heart exults in the Lord;

my strength is exalted in my God.

My mouth derides my enemies,

because I rejoice in my [b] victory.

“There is no Holy One like the Lord,

no one besides you;

there is no Rock like our God.”

Both Mary and Hannah offer these beautiful songs of praise to God, following a deeply physical, incarnated experience of God’s goodness. These women are changed by God at work in their human reality. Our Bodies matter to God, and God works in and through our bodies. In the book of Matthew, Chapter 11, an adult John the Baptist, in Prison, hears of Jesus’ minister and sends word through his followers to Jesus, asking, “Are you the one we’ve been waiting for? Or should we look elsewhere?” And Jesus tells them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Jesus describes his own ministry, his own proof of his Divine Role as deeply rooted in the human body and experience. Think of it this way, The ministry of God on earth began in the body of an ordinary woman. Scott Erickson, in his lovely book, *Honest Advent* says this, “If you ask a newly pregnant mother, hugging the toilet while wracked with morning sickness, why it’s worth going through all this hardship, she will

wipe away the remnants of last night's dinner with a piece of toilet paper and whisper, "For love. It's worth it because I love this child." The incarnation of God, in Jesus Christ, was born out of the same reason, For love. The ministry of God on earth began in an ordinary body, and the ministry of God on earth continues through our ordinary bodies. Our bodies are good, and are part of God's story. Just as much as our minds, or our hearts. What do you think about your body? How do you feel about your body? Can you see God working in your body? What magnificat would you sing?

I said at the beginning that many people, if not most, have a complicated relationship with their bodies. The goal of this sermon is not to heap shame or guilt onto that relationship. My hope is that this Incarnation Gospel, the songs of Mary and Hannah will make us more gracious, tender towards this fragile, holy vessels we live in. To love our humanity, just a little more, as God fully loves us. Even when in chronic pain. Even in insomnia. Even in marveling at how much sweat one produces mowing the lawn. Even in pants that feel too snug. Even in the freckles on your kids or grandkids cheeks. Even after a long, wonderful afternoon nap. How can we let the Spirit wash over us in wonder as we experience God in our bodies?

Further, how can we embody the Good News to others? Maybe it's in that warm hug. Bringing a hot, delicious meal to someone. Maybe it's in wearing a mask. Maybe it's babysitting so that wearing parent bodies can catch a break. We can ask ourselves, what acts of service to others bless not only hearts, but bodies as well?

In closing, Friends, I offer the words of Jan Richardson and her Poem, Blessing the Body.

Blessing the Body

This blessing takes

one look at you

and all it can say is

holy.

Holy hands.

Holy face.

Holy feet.

Holy everything

in between.

Holy even in pain.

Holy even when weary.

In brokenness, holy.

In shame, holy still.

Holy in delight.

Holy in distress.

Holy when being born.

Holy when we lay it down

at the hour of our death.

So, friend,

open your eyes

(holy eyes).

For one moment

see what this blessing sees,

this blessing that knows

how you have been formed

and knit together

in wonder and

in love.

Welcome this blessing

that folds its hands

in prayer

when it meets you;

receive this blessing

that wants to kneel

in reverence

before you:

you who are

temple,

sanctuary,

home for God

in this world.