

Dec 20, 2020 – NKMC online service – Mary, saying Yes

Into the darkness of this world -- StF 173  
The Angel Gabriel – StF 187  
My soul gives glory – Miriam Theresa Winter  
God it was who said to Abraham – StF 464  
Tell Out My Soul – StF 186

Luke 1:26-38 – The Annunciation  
1 Samuel 2:7-9 – Hannah’s Song  
Luke 1:46b-55 -- Magnificat

==ORDER OF SERVICE==

Call to worship

Into the darkness of this world – StF 173

Prayer – Candles and Conifers

Luke 1:26-38 – The Annunciation – Lesley Hitch  
PPT: The Annunciation by Henry Ossawa Tanner

The Angel Gabriel – StF 187

Meditation

God it was who said to Abraham – StF 464

Intro to Magnificat  
1 Samuel 2:7-9 – Hannah’s Song

My soul gives glory – Miriam Theresa Winter

Luke 1:46b-55 – Magnificat

Intercessions – David Hitch  
Lifting up the lowly  
Bringing down the proud and mighty  
Allowing ourselves to be used by God for God’s purposes  
Being open to how that might happen even in the midst of a pandemic

Tell Out, My Soul – StF 186

Blessing  
Allowing God to test us and try us and challenge us beyond our expectations  
Allowing God to use us to bring peace and justice and joy into our world.

Into the darkness of this world,  
Into the shadows of the night;  
Into this loveless place you came,  
Lightened our burdens, eased our pain,  
And made these hearts your home.  
Into the darkness once again –  
O Come, Lord Jesus, come.

*Come with your love to make us whole,  
Come with your light to lead us on,  
Driving the darkness far from our souls:  
O come, Lord Jesus, come*

Into the longing of our souls,  
Into these heavy hearts of stone,  
Shine on us now your piercing light;  
Order our lives and souls aright,  
By grace and love unknown,  
until in you our hearts unite --  
O come, Lord Jesus, come.

*Come with your love to make us whole,  
Come with your light to lead us on,  
Driving the darkness far from our souls:  
O come, Lord Jesus, come*

O Holy Child, Emmanuel,  
Hope of the ages, God with us,  
Visit again this broken place,  
till all the earth declares your praise  
And your great mercies own.  
Now let your love be born in us,  
O come, Lord Jesus, come.

*Come in your glory, take your place,  
Jesus, the Name above all names,  
We long to see you face to face,  
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

■ *Maggie Dawn*

Just when life seems cosy and comfortably predictable:  
Angels appear unexpectedly  
And point us in directions  
We would not have chosen.

Just when we have reached the point of comforting assurance in our respectability:  
Angels appear unexpectedly  
And pose uncomfortable questions  
We would not have chosen to face.

And when we have followed the pointings of angels  
And answered their disquieting questions  
And we feel that things can't get any worse:  
Angels appear unexpectedly  
And remind us that 'all shall be well,  
And all shall be well,  
And all manner of thing shall be well'.

For the God of love works to good in all who fear Him,  
The God of love works for good  
In all who dare to listen for angels.  
--Wellspring, in *Candles and Conifers*

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God  
to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,  
to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David.  
The virgin's name was Mary.  
And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'  
But she was much perplexed by his words  
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.  
The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary,  
for you have found favour with God.  
And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,  
and you will name him Jesus.  
He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High,  
and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.  
He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever,  
and of his kingdom there will be no end.'  
Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'  
The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you,  
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;  
therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.  
And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son;  
and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.  
For nothing will be impossible with God.'  
Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord;  
let it be with me according to your word.'  
Then the angel departed from her.

The Angel Gabriel from heaven came,  
His wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame;  
'All hail,' said he, 'thou lowly maiden Mary,  
Most highly favoured lady.'  
Gloria!

'For known a blessed Mother thou shalt be,  
All generations laud and honour thee,  
thy son shall be Immanuel, by seers foretold;  
Most highly favoured lady.'  
Gloria!

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head,  
'To me be as it pleaseth God,' she said,  
'My soul shall laud and magnify his holy name;'  
Most highly favoured lady.  
Gloria!

Of her, Immanuel, the Christ was born  
In Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn,  
And Christian folk throughout the world will ever say,  
'Most highly favoured lady.'  
Gloria!

■ Sabine Baring-Gould

If you're looking at artwork of Mary, as I was in preparation for this service,  
    You soon realise that most of them picture her holding a baby –  
    And that conjures up warm feelings of loving and protective motherhood –  
Which we then translate into warm and loving feelings about the Baby Jesus,  
    And the miracle of how the Godhead deigns to come into our midst  
        As a vulnerable infant needing our protection...  
But we're jumping ahead here: we're eager to welcome *this* God into our midst  
    A God that fits into our ideals of peace and happiness,  
        Or perhaps our need to be in control,  
But overlook the extreme inconvenience of God coming into our otherwise comfortable lives  
    And making everything very *uncomfortable* so that God's purposes can be fulfilled.

And so I have avoided the Madonna and Child artwork today  
    the 'highly favoured lady', portrayed as a flawless statue of white alabaster,  
    pure, unblemished, a world away from trouble and unease and distress.  
And focused instead on the picture suggested by the scripture text—  
    In a sense, the 'back story' or the 'before story' of teenage Mary,  
        Insignificant, inexperienced, full of questions and unease and not a little fear –

Our scripture reading today starts with 'in the sixth month' –  
    meaning the sixth month of Mary's elder cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy –  
A reference to the 'back' story which has occupied all the story teller's attention so far –  
    A story of God intervening in private lives,  
        even the intimacy of an older couple's sex life,  
            turning situations upside down to bring God's purposes to fulfilment.

Elizabeth's story is also one of quiet dignity in the face of public humiliation –  
    Which would have been the case for a priest and his wife in ancient times.  
    Not to produce a child, not to produce a son, was seen as personal and social failure –  
    (even today, the fact that we feel we need to keep miscarriages quiet  
        Highlights our anxiety about one's ability to reproduce)

For a priest not to produce a son  
    would have brought disrepute upon the whole faith community –  
    how could a community trust the leadership of one whom God had seemingly cursed?

By placing Mary's story in the context of Elizabeth's story,  
    We catch a sense of God not only reaching out in extraordinary circumstances  
    But doing so in a way that alerts people to the fact  
    That God might not always be doing things in the way we expect or demand.

It's also a context of restoring dignity  
    to persons involved with apparently 'hopeless' situations.  
It's asserting God's intervention on behalf of those willing to stand patiently  
    On the side of what is good and right and true.

The introduction to Mary's story also includes the negligible town of Nazareth –  
    A 'nowhere' place, not the sort where important things happened.  
In our own 'North Kent' context, perhaps it's a bit like saying something really important  
    Is not going to be happening in London -- but in one of our towns or villages –  
Sure, each of our villages likes to think of itself as supremely important  
    But if something really big is going to happen,  
    We'd like a bigger entity to actually take responsibility for it.  
    Especially so we're free from the blame if it all goes wrong.

Our little village might be proud to stand up against ‘Westminster’, for instance,  
But do we really want to be in charge of governing the whole of the UK?  
So, in choosing Nazareth, again God seems to be determined to risk involving  
The spurned, the insignificant, the ones that nobody really think  
Will amount to anything.

That logic follows to the next bit of information we’re given in the story:

That Mary is a ‘virgin’.

Right away our minds race to an assumption that has been passed down for centuries:

That we’re talking about Mary becoming pregnant before she’s sexually active.

That assumption probably says more about how scripture has been translated

And passed down rather than on what the original storyteller had in mind.

The word ‘virgin’ in the original translations applied to a young girl.

Our own cultural perceptions of when and how sexual relations happen  
and what they mean in terms of honour or dishonour or even holiness  
can’t necessarily be attributed to ancient societies.

That’s not to say that God can’t intervene beyond normal biological functions;

Indeed, the story goes on to say that ‘with God, anything is possible’.

More importantly, the angel Gabriel bringing God’s message to a young girl/woman

Signals that God is willing – perhaps even eager! –

To work with someone whom society might otherwise overlook or ignore.

Perhaps that’s even more unsettling

than wondering if God might work outside normal biology:

*God might decide to use someone as insignificant as we’d like to claim to be  
When the really big responsibilities come up.*

So, the story so far has reminded us that:

God has chosen to work with an older woman whose community considers

That her barrenness means she’s been cursed by God

God has chosen to make contact with an insignificant village,

Far away from the seats of power and wealth and authority.

God has chosen to interact with a person that society would consider inadequate,

Untested, unskilled, not yet having attained social status.

From the onset, this story should scare us silly,

Because it might just be saying *that God could just as well be choosing to work with us.*

Not waiting till we’ve achieved or accomplished great things,

Not concerned with whether society approves of us.

Not allowing us to hide behind either anonymity or fame.

Not looking to see if we’re living on the right side of town.

Just looking to see if we’re willing to trust God to work with us.

Now Mary did have some potential connections to a semblance of respectability:

She was respectably engaged/betrothed to a man in the village.

Who belonged to the house of David.

But as we know well from a future part of the story,

When Mary went with Joseph to his hometown,

No one could find room for him – or her – to stay.

Was the family so split that no one would let him park his hypothetical caravan in the drive?

I’m also intrigued to find that Mary’s name – a derivative of ‘Miriam’, Moses’ sister –

Means 'rebellious one'.

I like that. It gives a clue to why perhaps God chose her.  
Even if we assume it is a given name rather than one she earned herself,  
It goes against our images of Mary 'meek and mild',  
A cold stone statue of purity and aloofness.  
It instead brings images of free-thinking, of resistance,  
of dissatisfaction with how things are  
And a determination to work towards how things could and should be.

When Mary asks, 'How can this be?' and hinting that she's not really qualified,  
Then the question comes back to each of us –  
When have we tried to get out of something God is challenging us to do?  
I think of a young woman I know feeling trapped in a situation of domestic abuse –  
And living daily with fear that keeps her from believing herself to be good  
And strong and able to break out of her circumstances.  
I think of older persons feeling trapped inside their own small worlds  
Perhaps knowing there other lonely souls around -- but hesitant to reach out.

When I hear Mary's story again today,  
I'm aware again of some of the social and personal challenges that surrounded Mary,  
Mary somehow found the strength to say 'yes' to what God proposed.  
It hasn't always been that way for me.  
I remember a situation years ago when another Angel Gabriel came to my door  
Late one night when we were teaching in India.  
It was one of our students who had a particular problem he was facing,  
And he thought I could do something about it.  
I listened to his story and sympathised with him,  
but said there really wasn't anything I could do about it.  
He looked me straight in the eye and said,  
"Mrs Pickard, you do have the power to do something about this."  
In that moment, we both knew I was resisting using the power I had  
To do what God needed me to do.  
Indeed, the next morning, I contacted someone I knew, informed them of the situation,  
And got the problem addressed to a satisfactory conclusion.

It's my firm belief that God wants to use each and every one of us  
For building up God's kingdom of justice and joy and peace.  
It's my experience that many of these tasks will require us to do things  
Which are uncomfortable or stretch us beyond what we think we can do.  
We might feel fear or inadequacy.  
But still God calls – and tells us God will be with us – and not to be consumed by fear.

As we consider the impossible tasks that God has given us,  
our churches, our leaders, our friends  
To be active in bringing God's Promises to fruition in our midst,  
Are we willing to say 'Yes' to being part of that plan,  
Whether it means literally offering up our bodies, our homes, our families,  
Or, as Elizabeth did for Mary,  
giving our full support to those of whom God is asking much?  
Perhaps our saying 'Yes' is the real way that God will come to each of us this Christmas.

God it was who said to Abraham,  
'Pack your bags and travel on.'  
God it was who said to Sarah,  
'Smile and soon you'll bear a son.'

Travelling folks and aged mothers  
wand'ring when they thought they'd done –  
This is how we find God's people,  
Leaving all because of One.

God it was who said to Moses,  
'Save my people part the sea.'  
God it was who said to Miriam,  
'Sing and dance to show you're free.'

Shepherd-saints and tambourinists  
Doing what God knew they could –  
This is how we find God's people,  
Liberating what they should.

God it was who said to Joseph,  
'Down your tools and take your wife.'  
God it was who said to Mary,  
'In your womb, I'll start new life!'

Carpenter and country maiden  
leaving town and trade and skills –  
This is how we find God's people  
moved by what their Maker wills.

Christ it was who said, 'Zacchaeus,  
I would like to eat with you,'  
Christ it was who said to Martha,  
'Listening's what you need to do.'

Civil servants and housekeepers,  
Changing places at a cost –  
This is how Christ summons people,  
calling both the loved and lost.

In this crowd which spans the ages,  
with these saints whom we revere,  
God wants us to share their purpose  
Starting now and starting here.

So we celebrate our calling,  
so we raise both heart and voice,  
As we pray that through our living  
More may find they are God's choice.

■ John Bell and Graham Maule

In the days that followed on from Mary's 'yes',  
I suspect everything did NOT follow smoothly!  
We're told that she indeed went on to visit her cousin Elizabeth –  
Perhaps to get some female support  
Perhaps just wanting to find out how things were going with Elizabeth  
Perhaps her own family wanted her to disappear for a while...

The scriptures tell us that she did indeed travel to see Elizabeth –  
And we hear that when they met, the baby inside Elizabeth leapt with joy!  
We can imagine that in their days together,  
They both had a kindred spirit to think and talk and pray through  
Their most amazing circumstances  
And what on earth God might be doing through and with them!  
I found this piece of **artwork** by a Malaysian artist named Hanna Cheriyan Varghese,  
And her daughter has given permission for me to use it today.  
It shows the joy the two women experienced together.

Along with the story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth,  
We have the wonderful prayer/poem called the Magnificat.  
In it, Mary – perhaps with Elizabeth's help -- digs deep into the faith tradition  
which included a very similar prayer from Hannah,  
who eventually gave birth to the prophet, Samuel (1 Sam 2:1-10).

1 Samuel 2:7-9

The Lord makes poor and makes rich;  
He brings low, he also exalts.  
He raises up the poor from the dust;  
He lifts the needy from the ash heap,  
To make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour....  
He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,  
But the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;  
For not by might does one prevail.

By remembering Hannah's words from the old tradition,  
Mary and Elizabeth are connecting with something much than themselves  
Acknowledging their own roles which will stretch them to their limits and beyond.

Luke 1:46b-55

And Mary said, '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 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 for ever.'

I will sing it now in a version by Miriam Therese Winter:

My soul gives glory to my God,  
My heart pours out its praise.  
God lifted up my lowliness  
In many marvelous ways.

My God has done great things for me;  
Holy is God's name.  
All people will declare me blessed,  
And blessings they shall claim.

From age to age, to all who fear,  
Such mercy Love imparts,  
Dispensing justice far and near,  
Dismissing selfish hearts.

Love casts the mighty from their thrones,  
promotes the insecure,  
leaves hungry spirits satisfied,  
the rich seem suddenly poor.

Praise God, whose loving Covenant  
Supports those in distress,  
Remembering past promises  
With present faithfulness.

■ Miriam Therese Winter

Magnificat as a prayer of Adoration –  
Also informs our Prayers of Intercession,

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!  
Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;  
Tender to me the promise of his word;  
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!  
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;  
His mercy sure, from age to age the same'  
His holy name – the Lord, the Might One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!  
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;  
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,  
The hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul the glories of his word!  
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.  
Tell our, my soul, the greatness of the Lord  
to children's children and for evermore!  
--Timothy Dudley-Smith

Blessing:

May the God who came into our world  
In very difficult circumstances  
Bless us with a presence of peace today  
In all the challenges which we face.

May the God who selects the least and lowliest  
To do the most difficult tasks  
Keep prodding us to hear God's call  
And respond with 'yes'.

May the God who fears no evil  
Help us set aside our fears  
And be with us as we persevere  
In all that is good and right and true.  
Amen.