

Dear Friends,

Luke 1: 39-56

Mary has just had a visit from an angel. That's unusual. It doesn't tend to happen. At least not in Nazareth. The angel had come to her with an astonishing message. She was going to have a baby. I wonder how she felt after the encounter. Was she frightened about what lay ahead? Did she wonder how Joseph would react? Would he stand by her while people pointed the finger and made vicious accusations, or would he abandon her and make her face everything alone? How would she manage being pregnant and giving birth? Would she survive? I remember once reading that in biblical times one in three women died in childbirth. I don't think there's a way of checking that, but it would not surprise me if it were true. For Mary this was a matter of life and death. And what about the actual encounter? Believing an angel may be possible while he's standing in front of you, but what about after he has gone? Does the message begin to sound foolish? Does Mary wonder if it really happened or if she was dreaming or hallucinating? Or does this taste of the presence of God leave her feeling full of peace, joy, and confidence in God?

Belief has been planted in Mary. It takes root and grows. Later in her song she will sing "The mighty one has done great things for me". She knows that this is personal, that God loves her, cares for her, and gives her good things. But she does not use that as an excuse to turn inward and forget the rest of the world. She gratefully receives what she has been given and then she turns outwards and does some giving herself. She knows that God has blessed her and that compels her to want to be a blessing to others. We now see her begin to do that in ever widening circles.

She does this first by reaching out to Elizabeth, one of her relatives. Gabriel told her that Elizabeth is also pregnant. Mary quickly packs her bags and hurries to the town in the hill country where she lives. Elizabeth is carrying the child who will become John the Baptist. As we've noticed pregnancy and childbirth were life-threatening. In this daunting time, these two pregnant women turn to each other for solidarity, friendship, and support. As Mary enters the house, she calls out a greeting. At that moment, Elizabeth feels her baby kick. She knows that the child she is carrying is leaping for joy. Elizabeth says to Mary, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Calling Mary, "Blessed among women" puts Mary alongside two other women from the scriptures. We meet the first of these in the book of Judges. Jael is described as the "Most blessed of women." The second woman can be found in the book of Judith, which is one of the books from the Apocrypha, a collection of Hebrew scriptures from the time between our Old and New Testaments. Judith is described as "Blessed by God above all other women." It's interesting to see what led these women to be described like this. Jael had just killed Sisera the commander of the Canaanite army by putting a tent peg through his head and Judith had just beheaded the commander of the Assyrian army.

I said earlier that Gabriel greeted Mary by saying "The Lord is with you" and that those words were spoken to prophets and warriors. Here we find another hint that Mary may have been a bit of a warrior. She did not use weapons or violence, but she certainly needed an inner warrior and she needed strength to face the experiences of her life. And we, women and men, are likely also to need to find our inner warrior and to be strong and resilient in the face of life's challenges.

As Mary finds her warrior, so she also finds her prophet. Her song the Magnificat, fits comfortably alongside the words of the biblical prophets. In it she declares what is in the heart and mind of God. In it, we can also hear her reaching out in those ever-widening circles. She has reached out to Elizabeth her relative, now she reaches out to those crying for justice. She sings about how God has "Brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly" and "Filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." She has faith in a revolutionary God who turns the world upside down.

That's Mary, warrior and prophet. She knows that God has done great things for her. She wants the ripples of God's goodness and justice to reach beyond her to others. She takes it to her relative Elizabeth. She prays that it will go even further, as God does justice to the people who are most in need.

If that is what the mother is like what might we expect from the son?

God bless you,

Tony