

December 19, 2021 – Advent 4
Revolutionary Love

Luke 1:46-55

⁴⁶ *And Mary said,*
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ *and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*
⁴⁸ *for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ *for the Mighty One has done great things for me,*
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ *His mercy is for those who fear him*
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ *He has shown strength with his arm;*
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,*
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ *he has filled the hungry with good things,*
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ *He has helped his servant Israel,*
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ *according to the promise he made to our ancestors,*
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Please pray with me: God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

Last month, 66 years after being arrested and charged for not sitting in the seat assigned to her race, the charges against Claudette Colvin were expunged and all records sealed. Colvin was 15 years old at the time of her arrest in Montgomery, Alabama and placed on indefinite probation by a Juvenile Court judge.¹ When arrested, she was defiant, and shouting, “I have a constitutional right!”

Shortly before her arrest, Colvin’s high school observed Negro History Week, and it was there that she learned the stories of Black freedom fighters. As she heard their courageous stories, she knew she had to do something, but she wasn’t sure what that something would be.

On March 2 of that year, the opportunity to act presented itself. Nine months before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus, Claudette Colvin defiantly refused to give up her seat for a white woman. Reflecting on the experience in an interview with NPR, Colvin said, “My head was just too full of Black history. It felt like Sojourner Truth was on one side pushing me

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/16/us/claurette-colvin-juvenile-record-expunged/index.html>

down, and Harriet Tubman was on the other side of me pushing me down saying, “Sit down, girl!’ I couldn’t get up.”² “History kept her glued to her seat,” she said.

As the NAACP prepared to launch the bus boycott, they chose 42 year-old Rosa Parks over Colvin to become the public face of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. By then, Colvin was 16 and pregnant. She did, however, go on to be one of the four plaintiffs in *Browder v. Gayle*, the case that overturned bus segregation in Alabama.

Colvin’s story was told this past week by a variety of news outlets, and it captured my attention because of today’s scripture reading and the story of Mary. As Colvin talked about Sojourner Truth and Harriett Tubman, I was remembering Judith and Jael, all powerful women. You probably know a bit about Sojourner Truth, who with one of her five children in her arms, escaped years of enslavement and went on to become an ardent abolitionist, author, and women’s rights activist. Harriett Tubman, “was an escaped enslaved woman who became a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad, leading enslaved people to freedom before the Civil War, all while carrying a bounty on her head. She was also a nurse, a Union spy and a women’s suffrage supporter.”³

It is less likely that you are familiar with Judith and Jael, two equally courageous heroines of the Old Testament. It is doubtful you have ever heard either of their stories because most preachers don’t know what to do with them, myself included, until now, when I came to the realization that they have their hands on the shoulder of a pregnant teenager named, Mary.

The story of Jael is found in the Book of Judges, Chapter 4, and is retold in a more poetic song of the Judge Deborah in Chapter 5. Israel is in a bitter battle against the Canaanites, and Barak is the commander of the Israelite troops and Sisera is the commander of the Canaanite troops. Deborah sends Barak into battle, and he tells her he won’t go without her. She agrees to accompany him and at the same time offers a prophecy of what will happen. Sisera will fall, but at the hands of a woman.

That woman is Jael, the wife of a Kenite, who welcomes the cowardly Sisera into her tent after he leaves his defeated troops in the battlefield. She provides milk for Sisera, comforting him like a mother. When he falls, blissfully asleep, she takes a tent peg and drives it through the temple of his skull. When Deborah sings a song of sweet victory, she declares that Jael is “Blessed among women.”⁴

The story of Judith is found in the Apocrypha of the Bible in the Book of Judith. It is a fictional story that was known and circulated before the time of Jesus. In the story, the Israelites are in a standoff against the Assyrians who are trying to invade. Judith, a wise and faithful widow,

² <https://www.history.com/news/six-unsung-heroines-of-the-civil-rights-movement>

³ <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/harriet-tubman>

⁴ <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/jael-bible>

prays to be a good liar, and uses deceit and seduction to gain access and to be alone with Holofernes, the commander of the Assyrians. Once alone, and Holofernes sufficiently intoxicated, Judith cuts off his head, puts in the food sack, and carries it back to the Israelite camp. Uzziah, the town magistrate, hails her as “blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth” (Book of Judith 13:18)⁵

When Mary travels to visit her relative, Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth’s leaps in her womb and filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth declares, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” (Luke 1:42) Only two Biblical women, besides Mary, are declared, “Blessed among women!” and those two women are warriors and spies that save Israel. Those words, “Blessed are you among women,” link these three women together.

After receiving this blessing, Mary breaks into a revolutionary song. *“Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed,”* she sings. (1:48). Filled with praise, she proclaims what God **has** done:

- God has scattered the proud
- God has brought down the powerful
- God has lifted up the lowly
- God has filled the hungry with good things
- God has sent the rich away empty
- God has kept God’s promises

There is no Mary, meek and mild. There is Mary, empowered by her history, feeling the hand of heroines resting on her shoulders, ready to courageously act.

Jael and Judith aren’t the only ones hovering over this story. Mary’s name in Hebrew is Miriam. Miriam was Moses’ sister, who demanded equal access to God and was the first woman to be called a prophet. There is also Mariamne, Herod’s wife, a Jewish princess, whose beauty captivated Herod. This happened at the time Rome was conquering Judea and thousands of Jews were being killed. Her family thought marrying Herod would help spare them. She was a heroine of the Jewish people because she married, not for love, but for her people. In the first century, Mary was the most common name for Jewish women.⁶

Another woman is present in this story, Hannah. In Judaism, Hannah is recognized for her chutzpah (חֻשְׁפָּאָה). Her desperate prayer for a child was bold and audacious.⁷ Even the way she prayed was defiant. Under the watchful eye of the priest, Eli, she prayed in a whisper; inaudible to him. Prayers were to be prayed aloud – but she moved her lips without sound. Troubled by her behavior, Eli accused her of being drunk. Acting outside the control of her husband and the priest, Hannah dares to assume God can hear and respond to the prayer of a woman.⁸

⁵ <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/judith-apocrypha>

⁶ Amy Jill Levine, “Light of the World, A Beginners Guide to Advent.” 2019

⁷ <https://mendelkalmenson.com/articles/changing-gds-mind>

⁸ <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/hannah-bible>

Hannah, once barren, becomes pregnant and gives birth the Samuel, who she brings as a child to the temple to become a priest under Eli. After leaving him at the temple, she sings... “My heart exults in the Lord!....” (1 Samuel 2:2) We hear echoes of Hannah’s song in Mary’s song.

History has its hand on Mary’s shoulder as she breaks into her defiant, revolutionary song. Claudette Colvin felt the press of Harriett Tubman and Sojourner Truth on her shoulders, strengthening her resolve to sit against injustice in bold defiance. Mary felt the press of Miriam, Hannah, Deborah, Jael, Judith as she claimed her rightful place.

Mary’s song isn’t religious frou-frou. It revolutionary – a revolt against Herod and every political despot like him. It is a revolt against the cruel, oppressive, mistreatment of those on the bottom. She isn’t singing, “We shall overcome!” she is singing “We have overcome!”⁹ because of the child in her womb – because of her.

Before we turned Mary into a quiet, subservient, passive, innocent, impotent, mature young woman – she was a poor, defiant, courageous, bold, teenage, unwed mother singing about toppling kings and righting injustice. Even Mary’s name speaks of her spirit. Mary means to be rebellious, or bitter, or strong.¹⁰

It’s hard for many of us to appreciate the power of Mary’s story and Mary’s song because we do not directly experience the injustice that persists in our own time. But we don’t have to experience injustice to recognize that it exists. That is our work – to educate ourselves – to expand awareness - to use what power – what voice, whatever influence we have, no matter how small, to rebel against injustice.

As the week unfolds and we celebrate the birth of Mary’s child, consider HOW God has chosen to bring about all that Mary celebrates in her song. Some think this baby is going to put a king, from the line of David, back on the throne and restore Israel to make Israel great again – but they are proven wrong as the gospel unfolds.

The kingdom Jesus grows to proclaim can only be built by love and ruled by love...revolutionary love.

May we feel the press heroines and heroes of revolutionary love upon us – as we strive to live in the way of Jesus.

Amen.

⁹ <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/mutuality-blog-magazine/do-you-hear-what-i-hear-hearing-call-justice-marys-song>

¹⁰ <https://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Mary.html>