

December 24, 2023
The Day Mary Roared
Advent 4
Luke 1:39-56

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Mary's Song of Praise

*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 lowly state 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 indeed, 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 imagination 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 come to the aid of his child Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."
⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.*

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.

It has always humored me that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is invoked at football games. It started back in the 30's with a couple of players from Notre Dame, but it was popularized in the NFL in 1975 when Roger Staubach threw a game-winning desperation pass to give the Dallas Cowboys a victory over the Minnesota Vikings. In an interview after the game Staubach said, "I closed my eyes and said a Hail Mary."

For those of you who grew up in the Catholic tradition, you know exactly what this means. The Hail Mary, which in Latin is Ave Maria, is an oft repeated prayer which appeals to Mary as the Mother of God and is based on the greeting of the angel Gabriel to Mary in the gospel of Luke. It also incorporates Elizabeth's greeting of Mary when Mary goes to visit Elizabeth and they are both pregnant.

Last week, it looked like the Chicago Bears were going to beat my husband's beloved Cleveland Browns with a last second Hail Mary. The receiver had it in his hands in the end zone – and then he didn't. My husband called it a Fail Mary as he cheered for joy.

I find it humorous because I just like the image of these massive men appealing to Mary for an assist. As the ball hangs in the air, prayers are rising across America by jersey wearing fans and players desperate for a victory. For a brief moment Mary is hailed for the powerful woman she is.

Unfortunately, many of us were not introduced to the confident and powerful Mary. We have been taught that this young woman, draped in blues, is meek and mild, pure and obedient. We've turned her into the idealized woman who is passive, pondering, and in her place at the manger.

But that is not the Mary of scripture. That is not the Mary that finds her courage and voice. That is not the Mary that dares to sing about the toppling of empires and the downfall of the lofty from their privileged thrones. This Mary is bold and courageous. This Mary claims her claims her blessedness. This Mary, a young, unwed, pregnant, peasant woman living under the crushing rule of the Roman Empire, refuses to stay in her place.

The day Mary bursts into her subversive and powerful song is the day she finds her roar. Long before Katy Perry sang her anthem about a woman finding her voice and claiming her strength, Mary was already roaring.

Mary's song, which we heard read today and is known as The Magnificat, is so subversive and threatening to the status quo that throughout history it has been banned by empires and colonizers. Mary is anything but meek and mild. She is a bold prophet.

In first century, Mary was seen as a revolutionary heroine. When Elizabeth says, "Blessed are you among women," people would have recognized those words. Two other women in scripture are addressed with this greeting. One is Jael, in the Book of Judges, who drives a tent peg through an army commander's head to save the Israelites. The other is Judith, who devises her own plan to save the Israelites by seducing and cutting off the head of Holofernes, an Assyrian army commander. All that to say, when you hear, "Blessed are you among women," look out!

But all that is lost on most people who like the tame, nonpolitical, sentimentalized story of Jesus' birth. We set up our nativity scenes and forget the context of the story. We don't include Caesar or Herod and their religious collaborators. We lose the subversive nature of the Christmas story when we lose the context into which Jesus was born. And it is as subversive today as it was then.

Luke, the gospel writer telling this story, knows exactly what he is doing. By portraying Mary as a courageous revolutionary, he is foreshadowing the true nature of the child she is carrying.

There's just one thing. Jesus wasn't the courageous revolutionary people wanted or expected. He wasn't born with a sword in his hand. He didn't grow up to command a violent rebellion against the Romans. He was courageous, yes. He was revolutionary, yes. He challenged the status quo giving hope to those living oppressed by a nationalistic and violent regime, yes. But his sword was love and his gospel was peace.

What Mary had yet to learn is that love is the most revolutionary force in the world. And the radical love of Jesus requires us to summon the courage to give our lives if we must, for the sake of the unheard, the unseen, the unsung, and the undone. What Mary was about to unleash on the world is the unstoppable force of revolutionary love.

If I had my way, I would create an alternative Mary for every nativity scene ever made. I would get Mary off her knees. I would wipe all sweetness from her face. I would give her a strong spine and I would draw her

shoulders back and put her hands on her hips. She would exude courage and confidence. She would be saying, "I just gave birth to the only thing that will ever make this world more just." "She would be pointing to her baby saying this is the face of God, the face of love."

"Love Came Down at Christmas" wrote [Christina Rossetti](#) in her famous Christmas poem. "Love all lovely, Love Divine. Love was born at Christmas, Star and Angels gave the sign."

God revealed God's self to us through Mary. Jesus embodied God's love, and what he revealed with his life and teaching was revolutionary. So much so empires and colonizers have tamed it down and silenced it. We turn Jesus into an object of adoration, rather than an example to follow.

In the 13th century, a German theologian named Meister Eckhart said, "We are all meant to be mothers of God...for God is always needing to be born."

Love is always needing to be born. Hope is always needing to be born. Peace is always needing to be born. Joy is always needing to be born. Justice is always needing to be born. Compassion is always needing to be born. Forgiveness is always needing to be born. Nonviolence is always needing to be born. God is always needing to be born.

If we are all meant to be mothers of God -it would serve us well to see Mary as Luke portrays her and as the first century Christians understood her – as a courageous heroine – as a revolutionary - giving birth to the only thing that will save us all: the radical love of God.

A Hail Mary may be a prayer of desperation for athletes and fans – but for us – it is the call to courage. It is saying a resounding "yes" to God's dream of a restored world – brought about by love rather than tyranny or violence. Our Hail Mary is a birth announcement.