

Luke 1:26-49

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I wonder what Rosa Parks was thinking in the moments before she said no, she wouldn't move to the back of the bus. I wonder where she felt the fear in her body - her heart in her throat, her stomach in knots. She became an important part of the Civil Rights Movement that began to change racist and oppressive laws in the US.

I wonder what it felt like to be in the crowd at Stonewall, the exhilaration of finally being loud and proud, defying the police to arrest them for simply being who they were. Exhilaration mixed with terror, both.

I wonder what it felt like to build blockades over railroad tracks at Oka, or to put bodies on the line protesting pipelines at Wet'suwet'en. I wonder what it felt like to be one of the first Queer pastors in the Mennonite Church.

Doesn't change often happen that way - when someone steps outside of "the way we do things" often at great cost to themselves. There's no better way to change things than to opt out of "the way things are."

Every community has things that define it, give it identity. A group culture is formed by common beliefs about what's important and by the people that make it up. Sometimes those things are encoded into creeds or Vision Statements, or Constitutions. Other times they're unspoken and lie just under the surface, waiting for an unsuspecting newcomer to trip over them. Always they represent a common thread that is shared in some way by some or most of the members of a group.

Now, what happens when a member of the group steps outside of those group norms, does something different. Maybe you already know how scary that can feel. Such potential for conflict and discomfort for everyone involved.

This morning, we are revisiting Mary and Elizabeth for the second time in a month. Mary, unmarried and pregnant for the first time under mysterious circumstances, reaching for Elizabeth, miraculously pregnant for the first time in her old age. It's a Christmas story, I don't think I've ever heard it preached at any other time of year. In fact, just before Christmas, Haven took us through the story, focussing on the tenderness of motherhood. The image that stayed with me after Haven's sermon was her reflection that she herself had walked differently after she knew she was carrying a whole new person in her belly. And wondered with us how God might have walked differently before birthing the whole of creation. What a gorgeous image.

But texts are multifaceted, and the same story can speak in a hundred different ways, depending on who's reading it and in what context. This morning I'm taking a fresh look at the same story through a different lens.

Because what struck me this time around was how afraid she must have been. Mary, I mean. The whole story is couched according to the norms of the community to which she belonged. And she was about to break all the rules.

The text reads: “In the sixth month (of Elizabeth’s remarkable pregnancy) 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” (Luke 1:26-27).

This text is saturated in communal norms that determined a woman’s place and her ability to survive and thrive in the ancient world. And it all hinged on her sexuality and capacity to bear children at the right time and place, all according to carefully articulated community norms and practices. Elizabeth had just been lifted out of the shame of barrenness - now in the 6th month of her pregnancy, she had a reasonable assurance that her child would live, and she gives thanks to God, who “took away the disgrace I have endured among my people” (Luke 1:25). With the imminent birth of her child, *Elizabeth’s* place in the community was restored.

But now the narrative turns to Mary, named a virgin twice before we ever get her name. She is a virgin engaged to a man, which puts her in a very specific category. And puts her at a particular kind of risk. If this was a movie, here’s where the pensive, foreboding music might begin.

Every commentary I read agreed - the author of the Gospel of Luke is making a direct reference to what I’ll call the Community Guidelines for

Virgins, as set down in Deuteronomy 22, and it's no joke. Because if a woman is promised to a man and her virginity is ever called into question, she could legitimately be put to death. The guidelines aren't completely unreasonable - there are some loopholes having to do with how far screams travel and whether or not she could have protested and been heard.

The fact that she was engaged to a man was also pertinent. Had she not been engaged, she would simply have been married to the one who violated her. Maybe that's better than being stoned. Maybe.

So. "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...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" (Luke 1:26-28; 30-31).

"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."..... Then Mary said, "Here am I, let it be according to your word" (Luke 1:35,38).

The author of Luke says nothing about Joseph, though in the same story in Matthew, Joseph is portrayed as a gentle man who intended to dismiss her quietly in order to spare her the full consequences of her shame. Luke gives us no such assurances.

What strikes me here is Mary's resolve. She asks a few clarifying questions and then assents. Ok. Let's do this. She seems to be aware that she is being called to something larger than herself, that God was at work in and through her, despite the very real danger to her person, to her safety, to her future. She knows the stakes. Mary's whole body would soon be in contravention of some of the most well articulated guidelines in the Torah.

But can you imagine the courage it took? When she visits Elizabeth, her pregnancy is still a secret, her body has not yet betrayed her. I imagine the words heavy on her tongue. "I'm pregnant." Despite her resolve, how could she shake her fear? What a gift it must have been when instead of being met with disapproval and reproach, Elizabeth's face brightened with delight. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." There's something about having an ally in the middle of a maelstrom that makes things more possible.

Has there ever been a more powerful proclamation than the words Mary spoke next: Mary's Magnificat? God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

You can almost see her plant her feet and square her shoulders. Talk about a Goddess Pose. These words demonstrate her strength, her resolve, her

knowledge that the work she had begun in her own body would result in a whole world, changed.

I want to underscore where God is in this story: Here is not God the Rule-keeper. God is the instigator of Mary's contravention. God is the Rule Breaker! God is the one to tear down the powerful and lift up the downtrodden. God is doing what it takes to make things right in the world, even if it means breaking all the rules.

I guess what I take from this story is that God is bigger than the boxes we put God in. And that our carefully parsed standards and certainties - even the ones that make sense of the world and hold things together - are inadequate to contain the work of God in the world. And that it sometimes takes a person with a whole lot of courage to face disapproval and backlash, with the possibility for rejection, or disapproval, or even harm, to break through our naval-gazing and open us to new ways of being for the glory of God.

I'm thinking of Bishop Mariann Budde, who this week spoke truth to power. Wearing the black stole that signifies mourning, she called for mercy and woke the next day to death threats. In doing so she contravened the norms and expectations in that space. Talk about courage.

From an [article](#) written by Elizabeth Dias in the New York Times:

Standing in the storied Canterbury Pulpit above the president on Tuesday, Bishop Mariann E. Budde was a little afraid.

The leader of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, she had planned for months to preach on three elements of unity — dignity, honesty and humility. But just 24 hours earlier, she had watched President Trump proclaim his agenda from the inauguration stage, as conservative Christians anointed him with prayer.

He was no longer just campaigning — he was governing, she thought. His nascent presidency and flurry of executive orders had so far encountered little resistance. She felt called to add a fourth element to her sermon: A plea for mercy, on behalf of everyone who is scared by the ways he has threatened to wield his power.

“I had a feeling that there were people watching what was happening and wondering, Was anyone going to say anything?” she explained quietly in an interview on Tuesday night. “Was anyone going to say anything about the turn the country’s taking?”

So, she took a breath, and [spoke](#).

She advocated specifically for those with the most to fear from this new presidency, calling for mercy for migrants, displaced people, and members of the LGBTQ community. An unbelievable show of courage in the face of powerful opposition. She looked him in the eyes! They say the death threats began almost immediately.

Doesn't her speech echo Mary's, who knew the significance of the moment and seized it.

Here was an inbreaking of God into the world through the transgression of every rule she had ever known, and she took it into her own body. And somehow through the breaking of convention the real work could begin. The child in her womb was Jesus, and who exemplified in his living and his dying a new way of being - mercy for the oppressed, dignity for those who need to be lifted up, and love, always love.

I think the challenge for us as we both live in community with each other, and simultaneously watch for signs of God's work in the world, is to hold lightly the structures and conventions that we have devised. To pay attention when someone puts everything on the line for the sake of something they deem important. And to ground and centre ourselves for the time when we might be called upon to be the one to speak against the tide. Because it might just be God trying to do a new thing.

How did Leonard Cohen put it? There's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.

