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CONTRARY MARY

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This morning, I want us to talk about the real life & real humanity of these figures in our Scriptures. Unlike some other religious traditions, the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are mostly historically based, real people (although some in the pre-writing eras have grown to legendary heights). And mostly, our Scriptures portray them with their unique warts and foibles. I mean, Peter, who Jesus called the Rock the church would be built on, also denied knowing Jesus, much less following him, in the furor when Jesus was arrested and trouble was brewing. The great apostle Paul who founded so many house assemblies around the Mediterranean Sea in those first years after Jesus, talked bluntly about having what he called a “thorn in the flesh,” whatever that was that was a constant irritant to him, and although he prayed, God never took it away. Zechariah, father to John the Baptizer, couldn’t believe that his wife Elizabeth could get pregnant despite what the angel told him, so was struck dumb until John’s presentation in the Temple when he said, “His name is John.” Jesus’ 12 closest followers often didn’t “get” what he was telling them, at least in all its implications as to just what God’s Messiah is and does. Later in the story of John the Baptizer, even after baptizing Jesus and hearing the voice proclaiming him to be God’s beloved, even after pointing Jesus out as the Lamb of God to others, still sent to Jesus from prison, asking of he was sure he was the one sent, or should they look for another.

Real people, humans, like us, growing up in the religious tradition of Judaism, receiver of all kinds of God’s promises - yet currently living subject to Rome and not free. Hard workers, surviving as best they could in the understanding that they had, seeking to keep faithful to the teachings of their people. Probably not super prosperous, probably not scholars or intellectuals, just people. They didn’t have a lot of the leisure time that we’re supposed to have, with all our time-saving devices. Yet they were people of faith and believed what God had said to prophets and leaders in the past, faithful in learning and following their tradition.

To these normal folks came the remarkable events of God’s new & surprising revelation of Godself to humanity - the events chosen to happen when the time was ripe. John becomes a weirdo out in the desert wearing rough clothing and eating off the land - locusts, yuck, and wild honey. He’s out there calling people to repent and change their lives to be ready because God is doing a new thing. People went out to hear him and see him, like some spectacle or side show. Some were convicted and got baptized showing they wanted to get their lives together and be ready.

Mary turns up pregnant while betrothed but not married, and claims an angel appeared to her and told her this was a special baby to God, and that the pregnancy was an act of God’s Spirit. Yeah, right! Even her betrothed, Joseph, is ready to break things off - until he listens to a dream when an angel tells him the same thing. Mary goes to stay with her relative, Elizabeth, probably sent away to avoid any more scandal. Elizabeth is maybe one or two trimester along, far enough along to feel John move and kick when Mary comes near. This is a real female thing, a female reality of pregnancy - that little critter inside doesn’t just change our hormones and our bodies, they assert their own presence - they roll and kick and punch with their little limbs that are growing. Most women who have been pregnant know that the baby can get hiccups - that feels weird. My babies always woke up and got active when Ii sat down to eat and the smell of food got into my nostrils. Food! Food! It excited them. They weren’t always sleeping when I wanted to fall asleep - they had their own schedule of wakre times and quiet times. They are already asserting themselves as different from me, even when they’re not mature enough or developed enough to survive outside of me.

Elizabeth feels her baby jump for joy when pregnant Mary comes near.

I felt something like this once. I had already delivered my baby, and was out in my garden doing something, when another woman pastor walked around the house to the back yard, with a grin on her face. Something in my gut perked up, took note physically. It was a strange moment. I kept up with that clergy woman and her spouse for a few years, wondering what her son would become - we did Christmas cards for a while. I’ve lost track of them now; I’ve thought about trying to look them up. I’ve never had that reaction to other pregnant women. It gave me pause.

It’s interesting that both Mary and later John the Baptizer interpret what’s going on with them in terms of the prophetic tradition in Judaism. They both speak words that prophets used, they both claimed these events as life-changing and special acts of God; they both claimed the time as a turning point, an epoch-making event, with cosmic significance. This coming of a special act of God wasn’t just another cute baby.

Mary was first, while she was still pregnant: like we read and sang earlier, she praises God, and speaks of God’s mighty acts of justice - God brings down the powerful from their thrones and scatters the proud but raises up the meek; God fills the hunger of the poor and turns the rich away empty. These are words straight from the prophets of old, signs of God and God’s coming - things on earth are put right.

John also tells people that their ways of living have to change to care for the needy and poor - quit hoarding your possessions when some have nothing; quit extorting folks to get more money; don’t cheat folks and put the difference in your pockets. In other words, live with honesty and regard for one another - other people aren’t marks or dupes for your shenanigans, don’t take advantage of your power over the powerless. Because the just God is coming, who will be like the axe of the farmer, to cut down bad trees. Yes, you are children of Abraham - but your life needs to be right too.

I’ve been asked why presbyterians want to talk about justice things all the time, political things some people call them. It’s not just Presbyterians, by the way, good Methodists and good Christians of every stripe who listen to Jesus are advocates of treating the poor and powerless right, of wanting to heal the ills of the physical body and the body politic, the social structures that hurt people. How can someone listen to our Christ and not want people treated right? From way back in the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, God has announced judgement on nations and peoples that ignore the poor and extort widows and orphans - the powerless of that day. As well as personal integrity before God, God has expected nations to act right towards those less fortunate ones, too. Personal integrity and a caring heart is supposed to manifest in societies with integrity and caring.

If there are several sides debating, one way of telling which is the way of God, is to look at the way the poor and powerless are treated. Those who are looking to impose control and power over others, those occupied by outward obediences like the 10 commandments being posted or threatening those who believe differently, are not reflecting the God of our Bible. God is always known by the breaking out of justice for all peoples, by a people whose hard hearts have been softened with the love God shows.

I would agree with the folks in our country that call for our nation to align itself more with the ways of God, but I will disagree with those that want to seize power with military force or by cheating and lying, and then using that power to impose their restrictive outlook. Power needs to be used for the good of all, including the powerless that can’t contribute to your campaign, and those without corporate money behind them; elected and bestowed power needs to be used for more justice to be done, more people to thrive, a more equitable distribution of well-being.

The gospel of God always has political implications. Even in her pregnancy, Mary the mother of Jesus is seeing the time prophetic justice coming to the world; even John the Baptizer in calling for folks to prepare the way for God is calling for personal integrity to show forth in public & social ways. Calling Christ “King” is a political claim, because it usurps the authority of earthly kings and rulers. There’s no way for a preacher to not speak of things that are political. A preacher can’t tell you how to vote or name names - that’s rather abusing the position. But a preacher of the gospel has to preach the point of view of the Bible and of Jesus in its fullness, in all its applications. The gospel is always more than a personal morality, although it starts there.

So one way to be preparing room in our hearts and society for Jesus is to clean up our own lives, and begin to care for the poor, the downtrodden, those affected by poverty and racism, those discriminated against, those less abled, those whose lives have been scarred by abuse of any kind. As John says, if you have two coats, share one. If you have enough food, share some. If God has blessed you with worldly goods, don’t hoard it but share it.

The way to keep Christ in Christmas is to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the ill, welcome the unwanted, love your enemies, open your heart to God, accept the forgiveness and restoration that Christ offers, let God change you from the inside out, and extend that love to all around us. It doesn’t matter if one says “Happy Holidays” or “Merry Christmas;” it isn’t about family gatherings and overwhelming consumerism. The birth of Christ is about the revelation of God and the view of justice that God brings, when God’s word is welcomed.

May it be so. AMEN.

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