

God's Great Things

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“For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” – Luke 1:49

A sensible person reading the story of the run-up to Jesus' birth could be excused, I think, for beginning to think by this point that Jesus was born into a family of crazy people.

John, his second-cousin – perhaps – we've already heard about, and John was, to put the matter gently, odd. Bug-eating odd. John was a fire-breathing eschatological prophet who denounced the corrupt state of Judaism as he perceived it, and called his Jewish coreligionists to repentance. You could do that in a suit and tie, certainly, but John chose a camel-hair one-piece, the traditional attire of the Hebrew prophet. Like all prophets, John wasn't just foretelling, he was forth-telling – he was disclosing the deeper truths of God's way of doing things, and God's call to us to order our lives along God's lines, rather than bob along on the surface of reality where most of us spend most of our time doing most of our thing.

And then, in this morning's reading from the announcement of Jesus' birth to his mother, Mary, we hear Mary say to her relative Elizabeth that the Mighty One has done great things for her. For Mary, that is, not Elizabeth. And if you take a step back from this situation and look at it with both feet firmly on the ground, you have to wonder if Mary herself is really grasping what's going on.

She's not married – yet – and she's expecting a baby. In her culture, that was more than a serious problem – it could be a death sentence. Deuteronomy 22:21 says that an Israelite woman who is found not to be a virgin on her wedding night was to be stoned to death by the village elders in front of her parents' home. And in Genesis 38, when Judah's widowed daughter-in-law, Tamar, is found to be pregnant, he orders her to be brought out to be burned to death.

So Mary's condition, far from being a cause for rejoicing – for her, at least – could have been a disaster. She has already been told by the angel Gabriel that her pregnancy is God's doing – but there's no hint that Gabriel also told that news to her parents, her other relatives, or her neighbors in Nazareth. Mary is stranded with both a pregnancy and a spiritual experience, neither of which she understands, and both of which have profound implications for her future.

And yet she says in this morning's text, “The Mighty One has done great things for me.” You have to wonder what Mary's seeing that we're not. The immediate context – a birth under odd circumstances – doesn't bode greatness for mother or for child. And we're not the first to speculate about those circumstances. In the year 175 or so, a Greek philosopher named Celsus put in writing a rumor that had been circulating for some time that Jesus' actual father was a Roman soldier named Pantera, who had an affair with Mary, and that rumor continued to circulate for generations.

And we know how Jesus' story is going to play itself out, and for Mary, there's not much that's going to be great about it. Jesus' earthly father, Joseph, drops out of Jesus' story when Jesus is still a child, but Mary remains a part of her son's life until its earthly end and even beyond. Mary appears to

be part of the group of followers who supported Jesus as his itinerant ministry took him from his home in Galilee, up north, down to Jerusalem, in the south, and the several regions in between. Whether Jesus' public ministry lasted three years as we traditionally think, or barely more than one year, as scholars are inclined to believe, his mother Mary remained a steady part of it, at great personal cost to herself.

And in that faithfulness we see, perhaps, what Mary was talking about when she said that the Mighty One of Israel had done great things for her. Perhaps Mary already knew herself well enough to know that devotion was part of her make-up. Although she was likely not more than fifteen or sixteen at the time, Mary already knew herself and her religious tradition well enough to know that when she saw the right being lived out in her midst, she didn't give up, give in, or back down. If her unborn child was indeed to deliver her people from the hand of their oppressors and from their own enchantment to themselves, as Gabriel promised, then she would be a part of that great deliverance. And only a person faithful to God's laws of justice, mercy, and peace could bring that kind of transformation about. Mary's baby was destined for greatness not because of his own efforts, but because of his faithfulness to his mother's God.

And God's faithfulness to Israel was the bedrock of Jewish teaching, and everyone from Abraham and Sarah to Moses to Ruth to David to Esther and all the prophets – they all were held up in the biblical tradition as reflections of that same faithfulness. God had not given up on Israel, and the great religious leaders of Israel recognized this. Their faithfulness was in response to God's faithfulness. They mirrored the divine, and therein lay their greatness.

Perhaps the great thing the Mighty One had done for Mary was not to make her pregnant but rather to make her faithful. To make her see what so many of her contemporaries did not see, which was that God had not given up on God's people. The promise made to their ancestors so many generations earlier – to Abraham and his descendants, as Mary says at the end of her song – that promise was not broken. It wasn't easy to see under Roman occupation, but Gabriel had helped Mary see what others did not, namely, that God's faithfulness is most important not in the good times, but in the bad times.

When things are going well, most of us ignore God. When we open our eyes in the morning, when the food appears on the table, when the kids call on our birthday – most of us take all of that for granted and no prayers of thanksgiving rise in our hearts or pass through our lips.

But when things take a turn – when our bodies don't work as we think they should, when someone has betrayed us at work or in a personal relationship, when the good deed we thought was called for did not go unpunished – then we wonder. Like Mary, perplexed by a mystical experience, we ponder things in our heart. We wonder if God really is there, really is listening, really does care.

And greatness emerges when we affirm that the promise of blessing is intact without denying the reality of the present suffering. Spiritual greatness comes from that dual affirmation: the goodness of God, on the one hand, and the reality of suffering, on the other. People who have lost their grip on reality deny one or the other of those inescapable realities.

And it's not easy to hold them both in tension, and so many of us try to escape into a world of distractions and diversions. A world of abundant self-indulgence and self-medication. A world of false security and false immortality.

But not Mary. "Be it unto me according to thy word," she replied to Gabriel's message, which was her way of saying, Bring it on. Mary was saying, With God's help – in the shadow of the divine – I can handle this. It may not be pretty, it may not be smooth, it may not be according to script. But

we'll get through this, with God's help.

God's help is the promise made to our ancestors, friends, and it's the promise made to us. Whatever it is we have to handle, we can do it, with God's help. The Mighty One of Israel, whose mercy is for those who fear him, who scatters the proud in the imaginations of their hearts, who brings down the mighty and lifts up the lowly, who provides for the hungry if we'll get out of the way – that Mighty One is waiting to help us get through whatever has to be faced. God's faithfulness endures for all generations, even ours. And that really is a great, great thing.