



Sermon of December 19, 1999



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"TWO WOMEN"

II Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Luke 1:26-45

Our text for this morning is about two women who come together to tell their stories. They are cousins, distant cousins. Elizabeth, the city cousin, Luke says, lives in the hills of Judea. Her husband, Zechariah, is the priest in the Temple. It must have been a big city to have a temple. Perhaps it was Jerusalem, and if so, then Zechariah would have been one of the priests assigned to the Temple in Jerusalem. Which would mean he was a man of some importance. It says they lived in the hills of Judea. That sounds to me like some upscale neighborhood. So Elizabeth and Zechariah were people of status and wealth and culture, sophisticated people.

Mary was not. Mary was the country cousin from of all places, Nazareth, a town with a bad reputation. In past sermons I have, from time to time, tried to explain what Nazareth was like by saying, "It's like....," and then I would name a town near here and say it was like being from

there, only to have someone after church one day tell me they were from that town. So I don't do that anymore.

But I discovered there is a place that all San Diegans agree is a disreputable place, and that's Los Angeles. But that is where I am from. So I just want you to use your imagination and think of the most undistinguished, ignoble place that you possibly can, and that's the way Nazareth was. At least that is the reputation that Nazareth had. You can see that in reading the New Testament itself, because the rhetorical question is asked there, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

So Mary comes calling on Elizabeth, her cousin. What brought them together is not that they are family. I doubt that they had ever been together before. They probably didn't know each other at all. What brought them together is a common story. They both had an angel visitation, it's called an "annunciation," and they are both going to have babies.

Mary, the country cousin, uneducated, fifteen or sixteen years old. That's the way it was in those days. Betrothed to a carpenter in her village. A man undoubtedly a lot older than she was. That was the way it was, as well. And now she is pregnant, miraculously. The text says that Mary was greatly troubled by all of this. I would think so! Who could understand? How could she ever explain this to anybody?

Then she remembers, she has an older cousin, an older woman who lives in the city. Her husband, she recalled, is a priest in the Temple. So maybe she could understand. Maybe she could give her some counsel.

"So in those days Mary arose and went off with haste to the hill country, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zechariah." As soon as she enters the door, Elizabeth's baby "leaps in her womb." Elizabeth greets her with, "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb!"

Elizabeth will give birth to John the Baptist. Mary will give birth to Jesus. So even in the womb, John gives deference to Jesus. John will become the one who "prepares the way of the Lord."

But here, Elizabeth, the socially superior, the culturally sophisticated, the economically advantaged, defers to the simple, uneducated, uncultured, poor Mary. Elizabeth listens to Mary's story, and she rejoices. Then she tells her story. And afterwards, I imagine, they wept, then they laughed, and then they danced, amazed that God would reveal himself in such an unpredictable way.

Then Mary sings the *Magnificat*, which you heard the choir sing. It comes in the sequence of the story right after the New Testament lesson stopped, so it is appropriate that the choir would pick it up, and sing it, which is the way it is supposed to be heard.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.

This morning I want us to look at Mary and her "low estate."

Every year there is an advertising campaign in the cities of this country that says, "Put Christ back into Christmas." Unfortunately it is just a gesture against the great tide of advertising that commercializes Christmas. But I'm all for it. I like their slogan. I think we ought to put Christ back into Christmas. In fact, that's what we do here during the Advent season. So if you want to put Christ back into Christmas, then come to church.

But I wonder if you have ever noticed, the story of the Nativity, as Luke tells it, is really a story about Mary. So I have a slogan. I think you ought to put this on your bumpers, "Put Mary back into Christmas," because she is obviously the star. She is surrounded by a supporting cast of actors: Elizabeth, Zechariah, shepherds, angels, Gabriel, the archangel, Simeon and Anna will come in at the last scene, and, of course, there is Joseph, who has a non-speaking role. He shows up in the third act, in the stable, among the oxen and the asses. That's Joseph's role. But the star of this story is Mary. That's obvious. The spotlight is always on Mary.

Luke tells the story of Mary because he wants us to know not only what happened at Christmas, he wants us to know how it happened, because how it happened, is part of the revelation. It happened through a poor, peasant girl, through the least likely person. It happened through a nobody.

I preached a sermon on Mary once a long time ago. The title of that sermon was, "Mary Was A Nobody." I put that title out there on the board, where all those cars are going by on the freeway. I heard about it. I got phone calls, people who were upset, outraged. They said, "Who are you to put Mary down?"

Well their reaction was based on the doctrines about Mary formulated later by the Church; the exalted Queen of Heaven, the one who is pictured in all the paintings, and probably on your Christmas cards, clothed in the robes of royalty and wearing a crown upon her head.

But I was preaching from the New Testament narrative. I wasn't putting Mary down. She's already there. She sings, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, for thou has regarded the low estate of your handmaiden." Mary was part of the great, faceless, mass of people in this world who are numbered in government censuses. That is how they are known, just as numbers in a census.

It is appropriate that the story includes the census of Rome. That is the only time anyone pays attention to the poor of the world is when there is a census. In those days it was for economic purposes, for taxes. In our day, census are used to distribute political power. After that is done, the poor are forgotten, just part of mass.

There is a clock that I heard about. Embedded in the face of the clock is a digital counter that's slowly turning, never stops. It is like the odometer in your car, only it clocks the growth of the population on this planet. There are no names there. No baby being born is celebrated. There is no rejoicing. It's just the tumblers, turning numbers inexorably, counting the billions of people on this planet. Mary was just one of those. That's who Mary was, a nobody.

Emily Dickinson has a poem with this wonderful line. "I'm nobody! Who are you? / Are you-- Nobody--too?"

As far as the world was concerned, that's who Mary was. And the revelation coming to us at Christmas is, God does not treat her that way. God does not treat her as a nobody. God treats her as if she were special.

And it must have shown, because the minute Elizabeth sees her, she says, "Blessed are you among women." She must have seen the radiance that surrounded Mary. Mary knew that what was happening to her was not happening just to her, but through her, it was happening for all the poor and forgotten in this world, the people who were just numbers in a census. All those people are blest as well. That is why she sings:

He scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.

What she is saying is, the world is different now because of Christmas. Mary announces it. Even before Jesus is born the transformation of the world has begun, a new age is here.

In *Dr. Zhivago*, that wonderful novel, you remember, several generations ago, written by Boris Pasternak, there is a reflection on Christmas. It is a lovely piece. In fact, as I recall, the major part of that novel is set in the season of Christmas.

In that piece he explains what it meant in that ancient world, in that world of tyrannical empires, that this baby was born. You know that in the way he describes Rome, he is also describing Russia at the time of the revolution. He wrote, "With the birth of Christ, the reign of numbers is over, and the age of the individual has begun."

That's what Mary announces. Because of Christ, we now know that everybody is loved by God. Everybody is treated by God as of sacred worth. Mary is just the first of the poor to experience that blessing.

The Old Testament lesson for this morning is not commonly read during Advent. It is there, I am sure, because it announces that the House of David, the king, is to be permanent and established forever. Jesus is of the house and lineage of David, so it is a companion piece to the New Testament lesson, in which Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem, to the city of David. So with this wonderful irony with which God controls history, Jesus, the King of kings, is born in the same city where David, the king, was also born.

So the Old Testament lesson this morning is an interesting companion to the story of Jesus' birth. But I wish the Old Testament lesson for this morning had been the one that we read last Sunday. They almost got it right. They came within one week of getting it right. The lesson last week was from Isaiah 61. "The Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." That passage announces the coming of the Jubilee.

The Jubilee is the year in which we are to remember the poor. That law is found in the Book of Leviticus, the 25th chapter. It says that every fifty years there is to be a Jubilee, when all debts are to be forgiven. Land that is being held as collateral for loans to the poor is to be given back.

All people held in indentured servitude are to be released. Because the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof. It belongs to God. It doesn't belong to us. God's intention in the creation is that all his children would enjoy the riches that this earth yields. But the way the world is arranged, it is available just to a few. So the Jubilee says that every fifty years land is to be restored to its owners in the name of God. In the Bible the language used to describe that is "justice for the poor."

Isaiah prophesied that someday the Jubilee will be permanent. It won't be just one year in fifty. It will be a time when justice for the poor will be permanent, a time when all people will enjoy the life that God intended for us. A new age, he said, will be inaugurated.

Mary, in her song, the *Magnificat*, is announcing that age is finally here with the birth of her son. Jesus, himself, when he preaches his first sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth, uses Isaiah 61 as his text. It's his inaugural sermon. He stands up and reads the text, only he changes it a little bit. He says, "The Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, and to proclaim the acceptable year, the year of Jubilee." Then he sits down, and says, "Today this prophesy is fulfilled in your sight."

Incidentally, organizations, including major churches in the world, and especially the Roman Catholic Church, are saying that the beginning of the new millennium is an appropriate time to declare a Jubilee. Especially in light of the fact that in the world today, only a few have most of the wealth, and the great majority of people are poor. So there are some who are suggesting that it is time that the rich nations forgive the debts of the poor. And the poor nations, at least reduce the indebtedness so that the poor nations will have an opportunity to bring justice to the poor.

I remind you that Mary would have been among them. That's the message that Luke wants to get across to us. He wants us to see that Christmas is not only about Jesus, it also about Mary. And it's about what happened to the billions of people in this world who are just like her.

Wilfrid Sheed is a Catholic writer, and he wrote once about traveling through Sag Harbor on Long Island. He said he saw there what he called "hopelessly homely-looking girls." He said in no way were they attractive. He had an opportunity to overhear their conversation, and concluded that neither were they very bright. He wrote that he had a pagan friend who he was sure, if he had been there, might have said about these girls, "Why do these people continue to procreate and produce such hideous creatures." And he said, "I thought, no Catholic would ever say that. No one can be seen as worthless to us."

I read that, and I thought, if he had been traveling not through Sag Harbor on Long Island, but through Nazareth in Galilee, he would have seen something similar: homely, illiterate girls, who when you heard their conversation, you realized that they spoke in the dialect of the peasant class around the world. You can pick them out. They are ubiquitous. They are everywhere. There are millions and millions of them.

And Mary was one of them. She is not pictured that way in religious art. You won't see that on any Christmas cards this year. She is pictured on Christmas cards according to what the Church said about her later, the doctrines about her exalted status. But you read Luke, you read what it

says about her, and it hits us as revelation. Luke did not have to tell the story the way he did. He didn't have to mention that she was from Nazareth, a disreputable place. He didn't have to tell us that she was among the poor. He didn't have to tell us that when Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem, they were told to sleep with the animals, because that is where the poor always slept.

He didn't have to tell us that. He told us that so that you would not forget this, that Mary sang, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden."

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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