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## *Mary the Brave*

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*Isaiah 7:10-16; Luke 1:26-38, 46-55*

“Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ‘Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, ‘I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.’ Then Isaiah said...‘Therefore the Lord...will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.’”

Sometime around the third century B.C.E. a group of 70 Jewish scholars were commissioned by the ruler of Egypt to translate the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. That work, known as the Septuagint after the number 70, became a widely used source of the ancient texts of Israel. Three hundred years later the gospel writers would come to depend on the Septuagint to read the Hebrew Scriptures in koine Greek.

When the translators got to the seventh chapter of Isaiah, they mis-interpreted the Hebrew word *alma*, which means “young woman.” Instead, they inserted the Greek term *parthenos*, meaning “virgin.” Luke and Matthew quoted that incorrect Greek

translation of the Hebrew, and thus set in motion the narrative of the “Virgin Mary,” and all the religious mythology and embellishments that have accrued to her over the centuries.

The Hebrew word *alma* is a common term simply referring to a young woman of marriageable age, a teenager able to bear a child. In the text from the prophet Isaiah the “sign” God offers has nothing to do with the marital status or sexual history or miraculous conception of the young woman; *the sign is the child the young woman brings into the world.*

As difficult as it may be, Christians hearing this ancient prophecy would do well to remember Mary for what she is: an ordinary young woman, probably about 15 years old, without a husband, who becomes pregnant and bears the child Jesus. She’s a frightened, brave teenager, caught up in a drama over which she has little control.

Mary is not alone in her fear. Every character in the biblical Christmas story seems to be coping with angst or dread in one way or another. Things happen that are out of the ordinary, unforeseen, even startling. The first Christmas is not a happy time. From Mary and Joseph, to the humble shepherds, to mighty King Herod, the Incarnation unsettles people and makes them anxious and afraid.

When Gabriel shows up to announce her impending motherhood, it's not as if Mary had been expecting him. She doesn't remember the obscure words of the prophet Isaiah and say to the angel, "Oh! It's you! I guess the time has come."

With the benefit of hindsight, we, in our time, connect scriptural dots spanning hundreds of years. We weave a seamless cloth of sacred history, and think nothing of it. For Mary, however, it was an altogether different experience. This was her life, her body, her future. No wonder she was frightened.

Frankly, we may be more at home with Mary's fear this year than with the usual Christmas cheer. It feels almost like Lent, with its somber shadows and overtones. We don't know what lies ahead. Nothing in the last nine months has been predictable – in politics, public health, the weather, the economy, education, the arts and sports – you name it. And we don't know what tomorrow will bring.

There's a lot happening beyond our control, and it can be chilling...

...from the *macro*: are we missing the last chance to save the planet? That's what the U.N. Secretary General seemed to say this week when he declared, "Humanity is waging war on nature. This is suicidal."

...to the *micro*: will my family and I stay healthy and avoid Covid, and not join the nearly 15 million cases or add to the almost 300,000 deaths in the U.S. alone?

...to the *ever-present*: will our nation ever seriously face the awful truth about its racial history and the lingering inequities?

We're *anxious this Advent*. Like the cast of characters in that first, long-ago season of anticipation, we, too, are stumbling in the night, looking apprehensively for the dawn.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary."

What was it that frightened Mary? Was it the sudden appearance of the angel, or the news that she would have a child before marrying Joseph? What prompted the angel's attempt to soothe her fear? Was it the jarring realization that everything in her life was about to change dramatically?

The answer may lie in the song she sang:

*"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of the servant of the Lord."*

Mary knew she had little power and even less influence. She was a nobody in that time, and yet she sensed God had chosen her to bear light into the world. She made room in her fear for rejoicing, for hope. Can we do that this year, in our Advent anxiety?

“Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God’s name.”

Then her song turns from the personal to the public. She sings of a world transformed:

“God has scattered the proud. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

*Do not be afraid, Mary.* No wonder the angel said it: Mary is launching a movement to resist principalities and powers, and overthrow the prideful and the privileged. She’s taking on unjust systems that subjugate some and exalt those, the few, in control. Mary’s courageous song is a preview of the Beatitudes, a foretaste of the gospel, a glance ahead at the Last Judgment – and it strikes home. King Herod becomes so terrified that he sends soldiers to kill the child and silence the sign. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus flee for Egypt, to cross over to safety, just as brave women and children are doing today on our southern border.

When you stand up to power – especially if you don’t have any of that power yourself – you have good reason to be afraid. That kind of commitment gets you in trouble.

Mary, the young mother of Jesus, is a first-century Malala, the Pakistani girl who stood up to the Taliban and refused to give up her education. At age 15 she was shot by a Taliban gunman on a school bus, but lived, and became an international activist for the education of girls. She was the youngest person ever to receive a Nobel Peace Prize. This year she graduated from Oxford.

Mary, the young mother of Jesus, is a first-century Greta Thunberg, the Swedish climate activist who, at age 15, began organizing school strikes for climate, which caught on around the world. She sailed across the Atlantic to avoid flying, and spoke to the UN Climate Action Summit last year, castigating the powerful for their lack of urgent concern for the climate crisis. Greta has since been the subject of vitriolic attacks and threats by right-wing extremists.

Mary, the young mother of Jesus, is a first-century Claudette Colvin, the 15-year old Black girl in Montgomery, Alabama, who, one day in 1955, on her own, refused to give up her seat to a white woman on a crowded public bus. She was arrested and jailed. But because she - like Mary - was an unwed pregnant teenager, she was set aside and forgotten as an early leader in the Civil Rights struggle. Nine months later Rosa Parks did the same thing in the same town, and became a hero of the movement.

Every girl, every woman, who has been shamed or bullied, harassed or attacked, victimized or violated, is another Mary. The Magnificat is Mary's own MeToo moment, where she focuses not on what the world might see in her - the shame of unmarried

motherhood. Instead, she insists on what really matters: justice for those on the underside of history, the place she inhabits. This is Mary's freedom song, her resistance poem, her cry for a new day.

Malala insisted on her right to an education, Greta insisted that "our house is on fire," and Claudette insisted she did not have to give up her seat because of the color of her skin. They were each singing the Magnificat in their own way, in their own time and place, with the kind of courage that will change the world.

Mary knew that her coming motherhood was about more than her own baby; it was the start of a movement that would honor God by not standing idly by while people's basic needs went unmet, or their fundamental rights were trampled upon, or their human dignity denied.

She was afraid in Advent, but that didn't stop Mary the Brave. She lifts her voice in song and declares that the world is about to turn. That's the sign the prophet was pointing to long ago – and we, you and I, are called to point in the same direction in our time.

At its best, *the church is Mary*. We bear a word into the world, God's word, a word which threatens to undo systems that exclude or demean or deny the fullness of anyone's humanity. To pursue that vision for life on earth – which is what this season calls us to do – will mean pushing against prevailing currents,

setting aside some of our comforts, and going where we might not want to go.

In her poem, *The Gift*, Mary Oliver captures something of Mary's lifelong resolve that we first see in that early song.

“Be still, my soul, and steadfast,  
Earth and heaven both are still watching  
though time is draining from the clock and your walk,  
that was confident and quick, has come slow.

So, be slow if you must,  
but let the heart still play its true part.  
Love still as once you loved, deeply and without patience.  
Let God and the world know you are grateful,  
That the gift has been given.

(Oliver, Mary. *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*  
[New York: Penguin Press, 2017], p. 4)

We will need to have courage, you and I, *courage like Mary*, to accept the gift that is to come.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.