

What Does Your Soul Proclaim?

The Love that is God gathers us for a time of reflection on this third Sunday in Advent – this deep blue season, a season when we hold our senses open to the light of Love breaking into our lives and into the life of the world in new ways. This morning, moments in the story of Jesus' mother, Mary, invite us to wonder: What does each of our souls proclaim?

Let's begin with prayer: God, we trust that you are the deep joy residing within the soul – the core essence of each of us. We are grateful that your healing love is always ready to embrace and empower us. May we listen for our souls' proclamations today. Amen.

I invite us to move with teenaged Mary on a journey from everyday rhythms to proclamation – all the while wondering what proclamation might be forming in our own soul. We can assume that Mary was going about typical daily tasks when she experienced a vision of a divine messenger addressing her. Mary's family was one of a multitude of families living and working in poverty under the oppressive occupying Roman army. We can envision Mary working with her hands and her body when Gabriel comes to her with a shocking, inspiring message.

We heard, *"Upon arriving, the angel said to Mary, 'Rejoice, highly favored one! God is with you! Blessed are you among women!' Mary was deeply troubled by these words and wondered what the angel's greeting meant."*

"Mary was deeply troubled" – that is, surprised and confused enough to stop her in her tracks and cause her to notice the emotions of her heart and mind. **I wonder: what news have you recently received that deeply troubled you – that caused you to pause and be more fully present to your emotional response?**

I sense that it was Mary's initial pause (her surrender to being present with her feelings of surprise and confusion) that made way for her to hear the angel's message and to respond from her soul – her intuition, her truest self, the glowing core in each of us that holds God's divine imprint.

Let's hear again the essential message that God's Love addressed to Mary's soul. We heard, *"The angel went on to say to her, 'Don't be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You'll conceive and bear a son, and give him the name Jesus – "Deliverance." His dignity will be great, and he will be called the Only Begotten of God. God will give Jesus the judgment seat of David, his ancestor, to rule over the house of Jacob forever, and his reign will never end... The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...'"*

What was this!? Let's be with Mary's journey from her heart and mind to her soul as she absorbs these possibilities: *"...give him the name Jesus – 'Deliverance'... His dignity will be great...the judgment seat of David...his reign will never end...the power of the Most High..."*

Mary's soul (her core intuition) was receiving the insight that she was pregnant sooner than anticipated (which was a shock in and of itself) and also that the child she would raise would make a significant splash in their community. The way forward would likely be one full of both joy and pain.

How did Mary respond to this two-fold shocking message from God? We heard, *"Mary said, 'I am the servant of God. Let it be done to me as you say.'" How was Mary's soul poised to respond with such openness? I believe she held a heart and mind posture of wonder that encouraged her soul to trust the words of affirmation and encouragement offered by God's messenger.*

We heard, *“Don’t be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God... The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...”* Given her socioeconomic status, it would have been sensible for Mary to not imagine being a channel and agent of great and powerful experiences. But God did not need to work through someone who was already used to exercising power at or over others.

Mary reminded me this week of an episode from around 1980 from Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood. In this episode, he was seeking to teach children about experiences that perhaps can’t be changed – such as divorce, disability, chronic health challenges. He invited on a young boy named Jeff Erlanger who was in an electric wheelchair and would live with quadriplegia until his death in 2003.

Mr. Rogers invited Jeff to sing his 1971 song, “It’s You I Like.” I encourage you to close your eyes and hear these words from Mr. Rogers through the Holy Spirit to you (sung by Mr. Rogers and Jeff Erlanger):

*“It’s you I like,
It’s not the things you wear,
It’s not the way you do your hair
But it’s you I like*

*The way you are right now,
The way down deep inside you
Not the things that hide you,
Not your toys
They’re just beside you.*

*But it’s you I like
Every part of you.*

*Your skin, your eyes, your feelings
Whether old or new*

*I hope that you'll remember
Even when you're feeling blue
That it's you I like,
It's you yourself
It's you.
It's you I like.*

Words of love and wisdom from Mr. Fred Rogers. The angel conveyed to Mary that God's love affirmed her as she was – that God's love liked her just as she was. **I wonder this morning: who has been for you like the angel Gabriel, like cousin Elizabeth, like Mr. Rogers or Jeff Erlanger – someone who has loved you so powerfully as to convince you that they like you as you are – that you are enough?**

I believe that it was the encouragement of the angel that led toward Mary's proclamation in the company of her trusted, beloved cousin Elizabeth. We heard... and I invite you to hear these words to you and to our social situation in our valley, in our state, in our nation, in our world and wonder how you are being called by God as enough – to be part of all of these things that Mary proclaims we can do through God's love.

*"My soul proclaims your greatness, O God,
and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.
For you have looked with favor upon your lowly servant,
and from this day forward all generations will call me blessed.
For you, the Almighty, have done great things for me, and holy is your
Name."*

And these are the parts that we must do:

Your mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear you.

You have shown strength with your arm;

you have scattered the proud in their conceit;

you have deposed the mighty from their thrones

and raised the lowly to high places.

You have filled the hungry with good things,

while you have sent the rich away empty.

You have come to the aid of Israel your servant, mindful of your mercy –

the promise you made to our ancestors –

to Sarah and Abraham and their descendants forever.”

I wonder: How will you be a part of making Mary’s proclamation a reality in our time and in our spaces?

I would like to end with one other narrative from this recent century. The 2017 film *The Greatest Showman* starring Hugh Jackman is a musical biographical film about P.T. Barnum living across the early and mid-1800s, following his heart and imagination to create the Barnum and Bailey Circus. Barnum was inspired to gather and empower a band of beautiful, scarred, capable misfits in their society. Does that sound familiar? That is what Mary, Joseph, and Jesus did and continue to do in all times and places through their followers – through us.

The song that first-time film director Michael Gracey considers the film’s anthem is called “This is Me.” I highly recommend a five-minute video easily found on YouTube of an early rehearsal of the song by Keala Settle, who plays the role of bearded lady.

During the rehearsal, she was afraid to come out from behind her music stand and made her way out. It is passionate and profoundly moving. It still moves me to tears and I’ve watched it tens and tens of times.

I invite you to close your eyes one more time as you let these lyrics wash over you and speak directly to your capacity and your soul's core – glowing and coming out from you.

*“When the sharpest words wanna cut me down
I'm gonna send a flood, gonna drown 'em out
I am brave, I am bruised
I am who I'm meant to be, this is me
Look out 'cause here I come
And I'm marching on to the beat I drum
I'm not scared to be seen
I make no apologies, this is me”*

Thank God that Mary trusted the message of the angel – that the Holy Spirit would infuse and overshadow and lift her up. God (who is Love) formed each of us. And Love knows every one of our quirks, fears, passions, hurts and scars, and our capacity that comes from our deepest joy in our soul, in our intuition – our true self. If we let the light in through the cracks, then we can join Mary in today's proclamation, calling us to remember whose we are and how we can choose to move in the world. Let us follow the proclamation and make our own today – because Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
Dec. 17, 2023 | Advent 3
Luke 1:26b-56