

December 19, 2021
The Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Micah 5:2-5a
Canticle 15
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-55

Christmas movie season is in full swing. Jakki and I watched *The Muppet Christmas Carol* just yesterday. We all have our Christmas favorites, but the best viewing for Advent might very well be the BBC television series *Call the Midwife*. In case you don't know it, *Call the Midwife* is set in an extremely poor neighborhood in London, beginning in the year 1957. It follows a group of nurse-midwives, some of them Anglican nuns. They live together at the fictional Nonnatus House and provide medical care for pregnant women and their babies. The show is based on the memoirs of a woman who actually did that work. Each episode includes at least one birth—and at least one opportunity for weeping. Birth and life and bodies are portrayed fairly realistically, and therefore not every story has a happy ending. The show returned to PBS this past fall for its tenth season.

Among all the episodes over all the years, there is one scene that hugely stands out in my mind. It's from the special Christmas episode that followed the first season. Threaded through that episode is a storyline about an old woman who lives alone in terrible filth in an abandoned building. The full plot is too complicated to recount here, but I'll summarize with this: a young nurse-midwife tries to help the old woman; after much aggressive resistance, the old woman finally relents. As a first step, two nurse-midwives—that young lay woman and an older nun—set up a tub in the old woman's squalid home. Tenderly they undress and bathe her. While this happens, the only sound is a boy soprano singing "O come, O come, Emmanuel."

Today is the fourth and final Sunday of Advent. Two years out of three, Advent IV gives us a story about Mary's pregnancy. Last year was the year of the Annunciation, the story of the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary. This year is the year of the Visitation, the story of Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth. Though one woman is quite young and one woman is quite old, each is experiencing a miraculous pregnancy. Their meeting provides the spark that ignites from Elizabeth's mouth the Hail Mary and from Mary's mouth the Magnificat, which by repetition we magnify today.

We have been told that Mary might best be described as "meek and mild." That could be true. But let's also remember that still waters run deep, and so maybe that's not all that Mary is. We know this: God has placed upon Mary a wonderful and terrible burden. In response to Gabriel's Annunciation of that burden, Mary replies, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." It seems to me that we underestimate Mary if we hear her reply as passive acceptance. So let's go deeper ourselves by considering what Mary does next. What she does next is run to Elizabeth and announce that the world has changed for all time, the social order has been overturned, and God's promise has been fulfilled.

Mary gives God acceptance, but her acceptance is not passive. Mary's pregnancy has given her power, power that she promptly uses, to claim the authority of prophet. In doing so, she announces the overturning that is the heart of the Gospel message. In doing so, she enacts the overturning that she announces. Mary is not-male, not-wealthy, not-Roman. And she speaks anyway. Meek and mild? Maybe. Audacious and outspoken? Absolutely. It seems that God knew what God was doing in choosing Mary. As Jesus' embodiment matters, Mary's embodiment matters, and our embodiment matters. We still sing Mary's song.

Among the friends of me and Jakki is a lesbian couple in their thirties, one of whom is an Episcopal priest, and both of whom have a devotion to Mary. Hanging on the wall near the entrance of their home is a piece of calligraphic art. The first time I visited, it caught my attention from afar, perhaps because I practice a little calligraphy. From where I was, I couldn't make out the words, but I could see the beauty of the writing, an upright italic hand with exuberant flourishes. I moved close enough to read it, and then I laughed out loud, because it was not at all what I expected. This is what it says:

As for me and my house
we will serve the Lord
and systematically decimate
capitalism, racism,
and the cis-heteropatriarchy¹

Yes, we still sing Mary's song of disruption. Yes, we still follow Mary's example to be disrupters. We adjust the words for our time and place, but they're still hers.

A few weeks ago, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* published an article about the excavation of a sixteen-hundred-year-old Byzantine Basilica in the city of Ashdod [pronunciation: osh-DOAD]. The article begins with this:

The Holy Mother Sophronia. Theodosia the deaconess. Gregoria the deaconess. These are some of the women lovingly memorialized at a magnificent Byzantine basilica that Israeli archaeologists have uncovered in the southern city of Ashdod.

The splendidly mosaiced church, built in the fourth or fifth century C.E., is being hailed as one of the earliest and largest Christian basilicas found in Israel. It is also one of the most unusual, partly due to the number and prominence of graves and inscriptions dedicated to female ministers.²

I'll add that the burial place of honor in that basilica, the one next to the altar, holds the bones of what seems to be a woman. We'll probably never know what happened at that basilica. Still the findings add to the evidence that women *were* leaders in the early church. The Book of Acts is pretty clear about that. That truth was hidden for some time, but it's being reclaimed.

For those of us longing for glimpses of the divine feminine and hungry for what it can teach us, this is the height of the year—or, rather more appropriately, maybe it's the depth of the year. It's a depth if we consider that these shorter days and longer nights lend themselves to a sort of re-enwombment. Imagine what enwombment might be like. Imagine yourself held close and warm, your every need met, your only task to rest and to grow. God made Mary what she needed to be. God makes us what we need to be.

Advent is drawing to a close. Christmas Eve arrives in five days. I'm not sure I'm ready, but I feel this way every year right about now. I'm always happy when Christmas comes, but Advent always seems a little too short. I never manage to find the time to linger long enough to fully ponder all of its many important themes. Or maybe it's simply that re-enwombment is followed by re-birth, and it's hard to be pushed back into the world. But pushed into the world we will be, just in time, empowered by God to proclaim the glory of God with us.

Notes

¹ Here is a photo of the art:



² Ariel David, "Byzantine Basilica With Graves of Female Ministers and Baffling Mass Burials Found in Israel," *Haaretz*, November 15, 2021, available online at <https://www.haaretz.com/archaeology/MAGAZINE-byzantine-basilica-with-female-ministers-and-baffling-burials-found-in-israel-1.10387014> (accessed December 19, 2021).