

Luke 1: 39 - 56 Surprise # 2
Newtonbrook United Church - Advent 2, 2009

Good morning class! It is indeed good of all of you to come this morning after that party for the Drop Inn last evening. It is good of you to come and worship God in a different way this morning.

On this second Sunday of the journey through Advent; the Sunday we usually celebrate the theme of Peace; here at Newtonbrook we have Surprise #2.

Last Sunday was Surprise # 1. Let's do a bit of review class, what did you hear about Surprise #1?

- with God nothing is impossible

This morning the surprise is that we are not to focus on Advent, or Christmas, and especially not on Jesus. We simply only acknowledge that Mary, through this poem that has often been labeled, "The Magnificat", brings us one element of possible surprise for 21st century Christians.

For some, The Magnificat is a powerful statement about social justice and how the powers of Empire will be overcome, with God's help.

*"He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty."¹*

There is a possibility that we have heard this too frequently to be surprised. At the same time, we still see the powers of Empire conducting wars; denying refugee claims; and abusing the waters of our baptism, all in the name of additional profits that accrue to the rich and famous. We will see those Imperial powers parading, in the midst of their security detail people, in Copenhagen this month.

What Mary has to say is, of course, not new. These words in The Magnificat are a re-formulation of Hannah's Song. Hannah's Song is in the Hebrew scriptures - 1 Samuel 2: 1 - 10. Mary's powerfully inspiring poem about our

¹ Luke 1: 52,53 NRSV

mission as Christians is, like many other aspects of our scriptures, also found in the Hebrew scriptures. It is not new. As a Jewish woman, it is probable that Mary and Elizabeth both knew Hannah's song. Mary, or the author of the Gospel According to Luke, did not create this poem, they re-wrote what Hannah had said.

In fact, Biblical scholars debate whether The Magnificat was originally on the lips of Mary, or Elizabeth². Are you surprised yet?

Now, I said that we're not to focus on Advent, or Christmas, and especially not on Jesus. We're going to focus - I'm not trying to be pretentious by saying "we" - on the one who is commonly left out of the story we saw being played out this morning - the one who we skip over in Advent.

Who is it that we heard about in the gospel reading that we often forget?

- John the Baptist ?
- Elizabeth his mother ?

The story tells us that Mary visited Elizabeth when Elizabeth was six months pregnant, and stayed there three months. That means that Mary must have left about the time that Elizabeth gave birth. Next week we will read about John being born, and a radical surprise that happened when he was named. But there is a surprise in this story that is no surprise.

Elizabeth was much older than Mary. Elizabeth and her husband Zeccariah were, "getting on in years"³, according to the story. We also know that it had been an angel that told Zeccariah that Elizabeth would conceive.

Does anyone know a similar story in the Bible about older women conceiving a child?

- Sarah & Abram - Genesis 17 - Isaac
- Hannah - 1 Samuel - Samuel
- Rebekah - Genesis 25 - Esau and Jacob
- Rachael - Genesis 30 - Joseph

² "Luke", by Fred B. Craddock, page 30

³ Luke 1: 7

Are you surprised that Elizabeth's story is not a "new" story? The story of women having children late in life as a special favour from God appears at least four times in the Bible and it is a sign of the importance of the offspring.

Are you surprised that we may have overlooked the importance of the story of Elizabeth and John?

Elizabeth's son John is a relative of Jesus and John's story is woven into all four of the gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus. Why is John so significant?

Matthew and Mark introduce John when Jesus is being baptized. The author(s) of the fourth gospel created a tapestry where the stories of John and Jesus are woven together, beginning in chapter 1. Luke's gospel is different. When Mary enters the house of her relative Elizabeth, the fetus that would become John "leaped in her womb."⁴ John has a role to play; he is telling us something about Jesus even before he is born. Elizabeth isn't being kicked, as babies do - she has a leaping fetus!

This leaping fetus, as we know from reading further in the gospels, will have a life that foreshadows the life of Jesus.⁵ The ministry of Jesus began to blossom after John was executed by the Empire's gofer.

If you think like I do, and I know that I do, then it is possible that John has an extremely important role in the drama of the life of Jesus. He leaps in the presence of Jesus; he baptizes Jesus; his is a baptism of repentance and John's preaching is prophetic in the tradition of Amos and Hosea.⁶ John's preaching is a forerunner of the message of Jesus.

And God, you knew that I would get God into this somewhere, didn't you - I think that God has inspired a story where two courageous Jewish women; two peasant women; were God's agents in bringing about a return to the message of love for all of humankind. They can be an example to all of us. Are you surprised?

⁴ Luke 1: 41

⁵ Ched Myers, Binding the Strong Man, page 217

⁶ Ched Myers, Binding the Strong Man, page 62

HYMN # 44 - It Came Upon A Midnight Clear

Questions for reflection:

1. What song has been playing in your head lately? For what does Mary praise God in the song we call, "The Magnificat"?
2. Is the role of Elizabeth important in the gospel story? Why do you think it has been included by the author(s) of the Gospel According to Luke?
3. How is the faith of Mary and Elizabeth an example to us?