

Sermon: NEITHER “MEEK” NOR “MILD”

I begin with a passage from the biblical commentator Karoline Lewis:

Listen closely. ... Notice *anything* similar between Mary's song and Jesus' inaugural sermon in Nazareth?

[You will remember that sermon: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, / because he has anointed me / to bring good news to the poor. / He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives / and recovery of sight to the blind, / to let the oppressed go free, / to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.']

Back to Lewis:

[Notice *anything* similar between Mary's song and Jesus' inaugural sermon in Nazareth?] Like, **everything**? Maybe it's true that you can learn something from your mother.

Lewis contends:

Jesus' understanding of his purpose for his ministry restates his mother's understanding of God's working in her life. ... Jesus isn't just making stuff up. He's giving voice to how he grew up. He's articulating what he's been taught. He's known this from the beginning. It's what his mother preached. It's what his mother lived. It's what his mother taught him to be. It's how his mother interpreted Scripture. It's what his mother shared about who she knew God to be. It's what his life of faith embodied. Jesus can witness to the God he knows because he heard his mother give witness to the God she knew.

[Karoline Lewis, in <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4225>]

In the scene just before today's Gospel story, when the angel Gabriel visits Mary and announces God's invitation for her to

'*mother*' God's Christ, her reaction to and conversation with Gabriel show her to be self-aware, confident, poised, well-spoken, transparent and wise. In this morning's reading, her song reveals *profound* and *ready* grasp of biblical story, song, prophecy and wisdom. The Magnificat (her song) weaves the ancient song of Hannah together with excerpts of Psalms 25, 89, 98, 103, 107, 111 and 113, as well as excerpts from the prophets Isaiah and Micah and the wisdom book of Job. And what Mary's grasp and clarity are all about – *like Hannah's before her* – is the basic and recurring **pattern of salvation history**. The pattern **rests** on this: people (more specifically, men) when unchecked are greedy. Those who grasp and get more? ... in this closed-system (the earth), as I've repeatedly pointed out from this pulpit, ***their* behaviour** means that others have less. Whether the grasp is for more power, more land, more money, or more honour, having more means that others have less. For a while, it can go that the greedy succeed. But the Old Testament story shows **the pattern** over and over again: amassed-wealth empires rise, achieve their dominance, expand *until* some – **yes** – **closed-system** tipping point, then they fail / collapse / implode, and *in that implosion* comes the release (the salvation) of the downtrodden. (The Bible's calculus has, as its solution,

➤ Justice = Reversal.)

We get to read, in the **Old Testament**, Israel's *navigating* of the rise and fall of the Assyrian Empire, the Syrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Persian Empire, and the Greek Empire. Yet more intimately, we get to read of Israel's own 'fall' (*from* prophet-decried exploitative heights) *into* ruin – Jerusalem and the temple destroyed and its leading people exiled to Babylon.

So, the early-in-history and faithfully-perceptive character Hannah sings out:

³ Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.

⁴ The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.

⁵ Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.

And, **to the New Testament**, in the midst of Israel's internal exploitations *and* its external domination by the still-ascending Roman Empire, we hear Mary's song:

God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

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.

God has helped God's servant Israel, in remembrance of God's mercy

... **both women** specifically looking ahead – prophecying! – concerning the children they by divine intervention conceived, then carried, birthed, mothered, and gave over to God's revolutions on the earth, great reversals for righteousness' sake.

<Pause>

Advent is sometimes referred to as the Christian year's "mini Lent". The candles of the advent wreath are purple for penitence, with that one pink accent of joy during the journey. For us in the northern hemisphere, it is a season of growing darkness; and *in it*, we in the Church are invited to wait, explore the shadows, worry about 'the coming of light *ever again?*',

remember that hope is complicated *and* peace (let alone joy) is elusive.

It is our great benefit, as people of the Book, **to learn** from the many iterations of humanity's *greed-driven* pattern sung about by Hannah and Mary. More pointedly, 'us Christians' (equipped with the New Testament) [**we**] **learn** from the story of Jesus *at the beginning of Israel's end times* (... always remember that Israel was obliterated just four decades after Jesus' execution, and the New Testament writings were penned right before **and** in decades soon after the annihilation).

For me and I suspect for most everyone here, the shadows eclipsing humanity in Advent 2024 are, **by us**, much *worried about*. They add up to the fact that – **like Jesus** – we live in the beginning of *the end of humanity's latest greed-driven era*. We with some privilege are just in the birth pangs of it; a considerable fraction of humanity already find themselves thick in the violent, hungry, homeless, hopeless throes of it; a multitude of plant, insect, bird and animal species, and entire habitats, have already succumbed to it.

Mary, like Hannah, **models** for us what is Gospel – the news of **God at work to save** – for **our** time. Because, the collapsing of our capitalist-industrialist era *is necessary to save* the earth, to release the entire “groaning creation” from humanity's resource over-stretch and waste over-burdening which have so marred and wounded it. Not that the era's end is the end of the earth, for God's providence does not stop. ‘What is low shall be lifted up.’ ‘What is last shall be first.’ Mary actually embodies this for us to experience through her story. This illegitimately pregnant woman could expect – from her patriarchal culture –

contempt, scorn, exclusion, even execution. Instead, in the grace of God (and of Elizabeth!) there is rejoicing, hospitality and blessing-for-the-rest-of-time.

<Pause>

For goodness sake, Bond, it is three days before Christmas!; why be such a 'heavy'?, why are you not talking about hope and peace and joy?, and – for goodness sake – today's focus is supposed to be love ... “abounding love”, *comforting* and *satisfying* love!

Be careful and disciplined here, all of you (... all of *us*). The excesses and romanticism of our broader culture's “Holiday Season” have nothing in common with the love at work in Mary's story. In Luke's telling, she will return to Nazareth and – betrothed to Joseph but not pregnant by him – she and he shall live with constant social shame made even more gossip-worthy by frankly unbelievable claims about virginity. When nine months pregnant, she will make the arduous journey to the ancestral town of Bethlehem, which she-and-Joseph find so overcrowded by the governor's census-taking that they must bed down in a stable. And there – with no midwife or even a female relative to help – she labours and delivers.

Her love for the boy is intensely played out across the first eight years, in that culture, when boys stay within the home (the space of female power and work) to be – yes! – prized and *nurtured*; *thereafter* passed over to the public space of men, under the father's oversight. Mary's love for Jesus is played out when, around age 30, he sets out on his religious mission, and Mary (with Jesus' brothers) [she] reaches out, concerned about his

state and situation. Mary's love is there at the foot of the cross, when all the disciples have abandoned him (for shame and fear), and she must watch him hang naked and die.

This – *all* of it – is not some warm fuzzy “Fala-lala-la” love. It is ...

- Shake-one's-fist at “the proud in the thoughts of their hearts”, at ‘the powerful on their thrones’, ***who shall fall; and with the other hand***
- Hold-and-never-let-go of God's gift in the infant, the child, the man, the saviour Jesus.

It is the costly love that ***surrenders*** to God ‘*plowing* God's earth (God's creation)’ so that everything is turned over and all the fertility (the richness) that has been buried gets surfaced and allowed to generate life.

Call it “tough love” if you like. Recognize it as the love of a judge (God the judge) who passes sentence ***with passion for the common good*** (*creation's common good*).

When we, here in MacNeill, say this day, that “love abounds”, it is this *high* love (like Mary's) we *have* to be talking about. It is to be in us

- ***the Creator's love [the Creator's LOVE]*** for every Child of Creator (be they your family, your neighbour, your friend or your enemy ... *all* people, in *all* God's beloved diversity), in particular the downtrodden ones; [it is to be in us]
- ***the Creator's love*** for every creature of the earth, the waters and the air, [it is to be in us]

➤ *the Creator's love* for every tree, shrub, flower, moss,
blade of grass ...
for *it is all* 'the *stuff of God*' (... 'everything that is' is of God).
This love is a spiritual discipline (a practice), beyond emotion.
It is – more than any other 'driver' – what is needed throughout
the challenging journey ahead, to the end of the age. And,
what's more, recognize that – for the sake of whatever is to
come beyond this age – such love is our best contribution. At
which realization, we are standing right with Mary, and the
Magnificat is *our* song.

Amen.