

Which saints inspire you? What heroes of the faith motivate you? Who do you look up to as examples of the kind of person you want to be?

It's incredibly helpful to have people like the saints to inspire us and offer us examples of what it looks like to be a faithful follower of God. This is why we in the Episcopal Church have a calendar we follow – why we designate certain days of the year to remember specific saints and heroes of the faith and why we retell their story over and over again. Their example inspires us and helps us to emulate those we most admire – and they show us one of the many different ways we can be saints of God, holy women and holy men.

One of the saints we honor and revere in Advent is Mary of Nazareth. This past week I saw a cartoon with 3 women riding on donkeys in Jerusalem – one of the women is Mary holding the baby Jesus. Each donkey has a bumper sticker on it – the first reads, "Our son is an Honor Student", the second reads, "Our son is in Medical School", and Mary's reads, "Our son is God." One of the other women is remarking in the cartoon, "Well, if it isn't Mary and Joseph." But we remember Mary of Nazareth in a special way today on this Rose Sunday, as we recall her joy and read the story of her meeting with Elizabeth upon receiving the news that she will bear the Christ Child. With Mary, this season we wait hopefully, joyfully and expectantly for Christ.

Historically the Church's view of Mary has varied widely. It has been at best, narrow in scope, and at worst, a denial of who she was and what her role and calling was. Think for a moment of the images you have of Mary: the lovely paintings and portrayals of her in art – and generally a sweet, pretty young girl or mother figure. She's often portrayed cowering in fear in the presence of angel Gabriel's announcement at the Annunciation. Or we see her as a nurturing mother holding baby Jesus or as an older mother crying over her son. In general, we have held up Mary as an innocent young girl or a sweet, loving mother. And the church's primary title for Mary has always been "virgin" – she is "the Virgin Mary" above all. It's an odd title given her role in salvation history. But Mary has been portrayed not only as holy and faithful, but she is represented as tame, safe, and always comforting. Mary - a timid but sweet and godly, virginal girl and young mother who answered the call to bear the Christ Child. This is a safe and comforting image. But is this really true to the Biblical witness of Mary of Nazareth?

According to the Gospels, and today's lesson from Luke, Mary is much more than this. Not only does her role as bearer of the Christ child make her the mother of Jesus, but theologically she plays one of the most significant roles in the work of God's redemption. And what has most often been ignored is the Biblical witness of Mary as a prophet. Mary's words we read today, called the "Magnificat," are far from being sentimental and tender- these are powerful prophetic and even rather revolutionary words. Her prophecy is a danger to the status quo because it calls for a reversal of the social order and it threatens the powers that be. And like all the great prophets before her, Mary addresses difficult prophetic themes head on including the vindication of the weak, judgement of the proud and arrogant, exaltation of the lowly, and the turning upside down of the current social order, along with the reminder of God's fidelity to God's promises.

Listen again to her prophetic words in the Magnificat:  
"God has shown the strength of his arm,  
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.  
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,  
and has lifted up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
And the rich he has sent empty away.  
He has come to the help of his servant Israel,  
for he has remembered his promise of mercy".

Contrast Mary's words with the prophet Isaiah's in Isaiah chapter 5:

"So the people will be brought low  
and everyone humbled,  
the eyes of the arrogant humbled.  
But the Lord Almighty will be exalted by his justice,  
and the holy God will be proved holy by his righteous acts."

Mary's prophetic themes echo Isaiah and Jeremiah. In fact, in the early church Mary was understood to be a prophet. The early Church Fathers describe her as a prophet...but that title was dropped and lost to history over time. We forget that Ambrose said of Mary, 'We have not easily found anyone to have prophesied more fully than the mother of the Lord'.

The famous Methodist preacher E. Stanley Jones called Mary's Magnificat "the most revolutionary document in the history of the world." And theologian Ben

Witherington writes that the Magnificat is: '...a song of promise, prophetic protest, and powerful deliverance by the Lord of the poor and oppressed... Mary is thus portrayed by Luke as a type of OT prophet(ess) who proclaims OT hopes as the salvation of God breaks in; however, she differs from the OT prophet(s) in that she herself helps bring in salvation.' I mean, how often have you heard Mary called the "The Prophet Mary?" (I haven't -not even in seminary.)

And ponder for a moment what the Church has traditionally done with Mary's powerful prophetic words? We have set her words to lovely angelic sounding music and then, usually sing it all in Latin – where those prophetic words are safe and tame and probably no one will even notice or understand them! Mary's words are safer there, along with our image of her as a just a sweet girl.

I was contemplating Mary while driving in my car this week – and the way we, and I'm just as guilty as the rest, have not only tamed Mary but lost the sense of power and prophecy she brought when we view her as a lovely girl. And suddenly I heard coming from the radio the voice of Gwen Stefani and No Doubt singing this:

"Oh I'm just a girl, living in captivity  
Your rule of thumb  
Make me worry some  
Oh I'm just a girl, what's my destiny?  
What I've succumbed to  
Is making me numb  
Oh I'm just a girl, my apologies  
What I've become is so burdensome"

And I couldn't help but imagine Mary laughing and nodding with understanding, "Oh, I'm just a girl."

When we take Mary and her image captive and put her in a box, a safe and sentimental image of our own making, then we don't really have to hear what she says. Because her words are burdensome to bear. I know her words feel heavy to me – they cause me to have to ask really hard questions about what I'm doing to bring about God's upside down Kingdom in this world in tangible ways, especially for those on the margins: how am I lifting up the lowly and not participating in their oppression? How am I feeding the hungry? How am I participating in God's promises? And it makes me incredibly uncomfortable in some ways because I often

fail at it. And let's not forget that the Church has done the same kind of taming with others – we try to tame Jesus, John the Baptist, Saint Francis, and most of our beloved saints and prophets. But their words and lives speak louder than our best attempts if we pay attention to what they really said and did.

And I think the Church is beginning to return to our ancient roots, to see Mary for who she really was...as a prophet who speaks the word of God and advocates for justice and mercy for those in need. The time is ripe to reclaim Mary, as Ambrose did, as a prophet among prophets and to give her words the weight they deserve because the Magnificat is life changing if we live it. Mary lays out for us the purpose of Jesus' arrival into the world. And we don't do ourselves any favors when we make Mary merely the obedient, lovely, sweet and safe icon of the faith. We don't do men or women any favors – because we all desperately need heroes of the faith, both women and men, who are strong and unafraid to speak the hard truth, to speak prophetic words that demand our attention and even burden us. We need saints that challenge the powers of this world when our culture gets entangled in oppression and the degradation of those we've been called to protect and advocate for. We need the heaviness and weightiness of Mary's prophecy to remind us again this Advent, to take seriously God's call and to understand Mary in the way Professor Elizabeth Johnsen bids us: "to reclaim the power of her dangerous memory for the flourishing of suffering people; and to draw on the energy of her memory for a deeper relationship with the living God and stronger care for the world..."

So: how will you emulate the Prophet Mary this Advent?