

## **Sermon for The Feast of St. Mary: August 14th, 2016**

**Text:** Luke 1:46-55

**Title:** Truth-telling

Throughout my time in seminary, there was a yearly colloquium required for each class of Episcopalians preparing for ordination. At the end of our very first semester, we were asked to write an essay titled “This I Believe” to be read aloud during our final gathering. The prompt was actually borrowed from NPR: compose a brief piece about a personal belief that is near and dear to your heart. Our Dean was very clear that this was not a theological exercise. He did not want to listen to fifteen re-articulations of the Nicene Creed. After all, we all felt called to the Priesthood . . . you could sort of assume that we believed in God, the Trinity, the authority of scripture, etc.

I remember one hilarious essay from a classmate titled, “I Believe in Singing in the Car,” and another surprisingly moving one, “I Believe in Tipping the Pizza Guy,” When my turn came, I shared, “I Believe in Telling the Truth.” Telling the truth had not always come naturally to me. As a child, I looked around and saw a lot of lip service given to honesty but very few people actually practicing it. Politicians, celebrities, businesspeople, even the adults in the community I grew up in - most seemed far more concerned with seeming right, or with what other people thought of them, than with being real. From my family, I learned that the truth was often a liability, and that at the very least certain things – like one’s accomplishments – really ought to be exaggerated, while others – one’s fears, feelings, and failures – were best minimized if not omitted entirely.

But and by the time I graduated from college, I realized that the people I most respected and enjoyed were all, essentially, honest: someone asked them what happened, and they narrated the facts; someone asked them how they felt, and they simply shared their current emotional state. I found this shocking, unsettling, and overwhelmingly compelling. These people were not perfect – far from it – but they were not ashamed of their imperfections, and they were not afraid of being human.

So, in my early 20s, I took up honesty as a spiritual discipline. This took a lot of practice. Mostly it meant that when I realized I hadn’t acted or spoken with integrity, or had exaggerated or minimized something – even something small – I told on myself. I asked a core group of friends and family I trusted if they would help hold me accountable, forgive my awkwardness, and encourage me. And, slowly, being a more honest and open person became easier and easier, and I began to feel something I’d never felt before: a certain kind of wholeness and freedom, like my skin fit, like people actually knew me.

Today we celebrate the life and legacy of Mary, the God-bearer, and mother of Jesus. After a life-changing conversation with Gabriel, Mary went to the home of her relative, Elizabeth, then pregnant with John the Baptist, and it was there, in the tender company of friends, that Mary sang the text we heard in today’s Gospel. Mary has been seen throughout Christian history as a model for all kinds of virtues: courage, piety, strength, purity, and faith, to name a few. But as I reflect on the poetry of the magnificat, I’m struck by her honesty. Mary believed in telling the truth.

She begins with declarations of praise, but very quickly her song turns outward, recalling God’s deeds of power and compassion throughout history. God is merciful. God lifts up the lowly. God nourishes the hungry. God keeps God’s promises. All good so far. But God also scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God brings down the powerful from their

thrones. God sends the rich away empty. And there's the rub. God's values are not our values. God's ideals don't line up perfectly with the ideals we learn from each other. In God's economy, success, strength, wealth, and power are not necessarily bad, but they are not necessarily good, either. Certainly they will not save us from suffering or loss, or guarantee divine favor, any more than failure, weakness, poverty, and vulnerability will.

These are difficult truths. Hard truths. Unpopular truths. And yet, because they are true, Mary does not sugar-coat God's complexity. She rejoices in the favor of God: a God who asks a young girl to carry to savior of the world in her womb; a God who so often does not work in the ways we would expect, or even want, and yet who promises to meet us where we are and walk the long road together.

Mary's courageous honesty inspired me ten years ago, and continues to inspire me today. Think of the reality of Mary's situation when she sings this song. She is pregnant. She is not married. She is terribly young. I imagine that when she went to Elizabeth, she had other truths to share with her: truths like, "I'm scared," or "I don't know what I've gotten myself into," or "You know I've always loved your tabouleh but the smell of it is making me sick." Yet even in her fear and her uncertainty, her excitement and her wonder, Mary realized that what was happening in and through her wasn't only *about* her. It was also about God, and God's overwhelming love for all people. Only those deeply rooted in reality, free from the constrictions of self, can let their life shine with God's truth so completely.

I'm also inspired by Mary's trust. The last time I preached on this feast two years ago, I was pregnant with my first child. I look back on that time and think, "Wow, I had no idea what I was getting myself in to." I was excited to become a mom. I was thrilled to be gifted the life within me, just as I am this time around. But saying YES to anything truly new, to any of God's surprising invitations, is always a huge risk. And if we are honest, our decisions in such moments are very rarely "informed." How could they be? Did you really know what you were getting into when you got married? Or started going to Church? Or went into therapy for the first time? Or took that new job? Doubtful. And yet we *do* say yes to these things, just as we say yes to getting up each morning in an unpredictable world, to a day we know is just as likely to hold heartache as happiness, because we trust that there is something bigger than that heartache or that happiness worth waking up for.

I imagine Mary could agree to carry Jesus with such humble strength, because she had become comfortable in God's reality. She was familiar with God's ways. She could accept difficult yet sacred truths. Letting go of our need to be right, righteous, or revered, and opening to being known and loved just as we are, is scary. It's hard. But as we drop the defenses that keep us separated from ourselves and one another, we also become more open to God, and more familiar with the mysteries and depths of life. Mary believed in telling the truth, and with her God proclaimed God's greatest truth: the word incarnate; the very life of Jesus.

What do you believe?