

Solidarity with “the strangest thing in Christianity”

Luke: 1:39-45

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First Sunday of Advent

Our theme for advent this year is embodiment. If we want to hear these stories about the birth of Christ anew, embodiment is a solid theme to work with. North American Protestants, white folks especially, have a pretty notoriously disembodied reading of the Bible. We take passages that really could be about how we move in this world with other people and make those things too academic or we over-spiritualize. The only time we let ourselves really talk about bodies is when Jesus is being murdered, his body being destroyed. We're either totally avoiding the body or actively trying to distract ourselves from the whole body by focusing on the gory, sensationalized details of a crime scene. Avoiding or fetishizing. But that's about Christ death and we're here to talk about pregnancy, a birth, a baby, a mother...lives just beginning.

We have, using a multitude of theological lenses, allowed Mary to be a lot of who she actually was. We talk about Mary as woman of color, a young person, a poor person, an unsheltered refugee. She was those things. And naming those realities helps us make connections between the mother of Christ and young people in this country and all over the world who find themselves pregnant or parenting in hostile, death-dealing cultures. Framing Mary in this way gives folks who look like this Mary, live like this Mary cause for celebration. This story reflects their life and makes the story about them. I imagine that during this advent season other preachers who occupy this pulpit will discuss Mary in this way. This is good because as Americans we really must review the reality of Mary's life every year. The most recent proof of the necessity of this lesson are the reprehensible, racist comments made about “Middle-Eastern” immigrants by too many of this country's citizens.

But in an effort to say who Mary really was, place her story in the proper political context, we often forget to talk about the conception of Christ. Maybe “forget” is the wrong word. Some part of me thinks we are downplaying this part of the story to avoid an uncomfortable, socially dicey conversation about bodily purity and virginity. But if we abandon the story of Christ's conception because we don't like the way we've heard it discussed, we cede that story to folks who want to use Mary to control the bodies of young women....ya know to convince young women that they need to remain virgins until after they've given birth.?

We can't just hand this part of Mary's story over because this piece makes Mary as strange (maybe stranger) than everything else in the gospel story. This story helps build her identity and we don't want to do violence to Mary by not acknowledging how complex she is. And of course when we cut out part of her identity we also alienate the group of people that

can see themselves in this part of Mary. I'll get to who those folks are in a little bit. But first, Mary's strangeness....

Marcella Althaus-Reid actually called Mary "the strangest thing in Christianity". I pulled part of the title for tonight's sermon from her book "Indecent Theology". Marcella has many reasons to call "the God-bearer" strange. At least part of the bestowal of the "strangest thing" title has to do with the Mary giving birth to God's son and to God at the same time. Mary conceives because she is visited by the Holy Spirit, the part of the trinity discussed with feminine grammar in Hebrew and Aramaic and in gender neutral grammar in Greek. Mary is the human that makes God's incarnation possible. She is the door between. Only through her is God embodied in this world as a helpless child. And as far as I can tell, Mary has one of the most intimate interactions with the Holy Spirit. Marcella's right. This stuff is weird.

All this stuff makes Mary strange to think about in a disembodied, academic, spiritual way. But what makes Mary "other" right where she is? What makes Mary strange in her context? Mary was a person of color, sure...but Mary lived in Nazareth where she was surrounded by people who looked just like her. The economic system Mary lived under was inherently oppressive, caste-like. She was a poor person surrounded by poor people. All the women that Mary knew had been "purchased for a price" to be married as teenagers. This was Mary's reality. Though it is a reality shared by people marginalized in our culture, it really didn't set Mary apart in her time.

Here's what sets Mary apart. When Gabriel the angel visits Mary, she's alone. The angel explains that Mary will become pregnant without having sex. Joseph receives this information so he will not leave his betrothed virgin. Elizabeth and Zechariah are also visited by Gabriel. The shepherds and the people at temple when Christ is dedicated know that the savior has arrived. But nobody else is really ever told about "the virgin birth", not by any external, authoritative source. And we know that when Jesus shows up to preach in Nazareth as an adult, the neighbors that Mary walked by every day "take offense" at Jesus' message and try to throw him off a cliff. If folks don't believe Jesus is the messiah, they have no reason to believe Mary's story about having God's baby. All people know is that Mary was pregnant before she got married.

Mary, who conceived out of wedlock, is a sexual outcast. This is the piece that sets Mary apart from her neighbors and makes her lonely, as lonely in her day as she is strange in ours.

Can we see Mary walking into town, head down so as not to see side glances? Perhaps she is repeating to herself some prayer, some word of encouragement to block out comments and hushed gossip: "Jesus sure doesn't look like Joseph", "Horrible woman, putting her husband in that position...wouldn't leave my husband alone with her." People pull their kids out of her path. Certain folks at the market don't sell to her. Scribes and priests turn away in her presence

-they have their own prayer to protect themselves from women like her. Lots of doors might have been closed to Mary. Lots. And Jesus watched all this. Jesus, the child of a sexual outcast, saw the way his mother was treated. And it shouldn't surprise us that as an adult, Jesus often broke bread with other sexual outcasts. He had first-hand knowledge of the way women of ill-repute were treated.

Mary was amongst friends during the last few years of Jesus' life but we're talking about nearly 30 years of this shit. Thirty years of micro-aggressions and possible outright assault that we never hear about but really have to imagine to understand Mary and Jesus.

Earlier I mentioned that by not talking about the conception we do three things: we cede the story to people who want to use Mary to police the bodies of young women, we cut out part of Mary's reality, and we alienate a group of people who need to see themselves in the text. By naming Mary as a sexual outcast we undo some of this and we invite modern-day sexual outcasts, namely lesbian; gay; bisexual; transgender; and queer folks, back into conversation. You see, we can say that we're "welcoming" but welcoming really isn't enough. It isn't enough to talk about the text in an inoffensive way. The story has to be about us. And for the story to be about us, for us to see ourselves in the text as queer folks, we have to name the sexual outcasts and talk about bodies a lot of the time, not just when a body is being destroyed.

Last week was Transgender Day of Remembrance. Every year folks get together to name and honor all the trans* people who have been murdered in the previous year. This year 271 murders of trans* folks were reported. This number is higher than it has been in previous years. And in the midst of all of this loss an interesting thing happened. Trans* activists got together shortly before the national day of remembrance and said "We want a trans day of resilience. Y'all only talk about us when a crime has been committed against us, when our bodies have been destroyed. Those roses you put at our memorial sites....we want our roses while we're living. Talk about us while we're alive, resisting, creating. We want our roses now."

I think Elizabeth knew something about giving Mary her roses in this life. Our passage tonight, Luke 1:39-45, is a word from a woman who, on some level, gets Mary's struggle. And I think Elizabeth's words might have been what Mary repeated to herself as she slipped through the town, short on friends and at the mercy of gossipers. "Blessed are you Mary. Who am I to have you in my house? Damn, even my unborn child is jumping for joy!" These words of solidarity and the knowledge that God had a particular plan for her...that's what sustained Mary. And for a lot of sexual outcasts today, this is our sustenance too. There have certainly been times in my life when a word and the Call were the only resources I could claim.

We have to talk about bodies now. And I say this to myself as much as I say it to anybody else. I stand up here and preach pretty regularly but I don't talk about my community,

the queer community too much. And I think that's, in part, because when I preach I deliver a word from my mind or my spirit but I leave my body outside.

Trans* people are oppressed because of how they perform their gender in their bodies. People with marginal sexual orientations are maligned because of what we do with our bodies in relationship with others, because of how we have sex. We can say that gay people are targets for discrimination because "we love differently" all day long. But that's not true. We love the same. We do other things differently. Our oppression is about our bodies and what we do with them. Our bodies hold the wounds and the memories of being other-ed.

And because I am not sure that the church is ready to address those memories and show me where I show up in the story, I just leave my body outside with most of the rest of America's sexual outcasts.

Leadership in the Black Lives Matter movement, leadership that has been dominated from the beginning by black queer women, has really privileged the idea of self-care, self-love, love of black bodies regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Rev. Sekou, a minister who has been on the ground with BLM protesters in Ferguson, has noted how much BLM's self-care ethic reflects this line from Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*: "Love your hands, love your flesh, cause out yonder, they don't love your flesh".

We want to support peoples' love of their flesh and we definitely don't want to be part of the "they" "out yonder". We have to invite people, bodies and all, into this room. And we have the resources to do it through this text, this particular story.

As we enter Advent, this time of anticipation, I invite you to wait for the birth of Christ with your whole self...imagining Mary's reality in all its fullness. Let's honor the God-bearer, the door to incarnation, for everything she really was.