

This fourth Sunday in Advent belongs to the mother Mary. We light a pink candle on the Advent wreath to honor her and to celebrate the joy that coexists in this season of quiet shadowy waiting for Jesus to come into the world.

As we celebrate Rose Sunday, I'd like to suggest we consider a different perspective of Mary.

This is not a meek and mild woman, but a fearless risk taker of deep faith and courage. A woman who demonstrates the ability and willingness to empty herself, to allow God to direct her life, to put away the fear of what other people might think and instead consent to God's direction no matter how crazy, impossible, and wholly unexpected it may be.

She gives us an opportunity to do the same. To greet the surprise turns in our lives not with fear and resistance, but with a spirit of wonder and curiosity. It's an opportunity for reorientation from "Why is this happening?!" to "What is the God of impossible surprises doing in this turn of events?"

Mary, God's chosen one, begins her life as a poor peasant. She was a young girl from a town in the backwaters of Judea. Nazareth was a tiny farming village high on a hill far from the main trading routes. She lived under the ruthless rule of King Herod the Great who's allegiance to Rome and heavy taxation led to outbreaks of violence and rioting soon after his death around the time Jesus was born.

When we meet her in Luke's gospel, she is visited by the angel Gabriel, who delivers a message of God's intention for her life. It is a message that will change everything, including her own life dramatically, and one that she ponders in her heart and then recognizes as part of a larger faith story full of surprising impossible glorious things.

The stories she grew up with tell of a God who brought his people through the bonds of oppression into freedom, a God who births a great family of followers from an old and seemingly barren womb, a God who consistently chooses the younger, the weaker, the other to carry out his plan of healing and redemption of the world.

She would also know that the path of God's chosen ones was not an easy road. She would know the stories of what followed in the lives of other chosen ones like Moses, David, Elijah and Jonah, that their lives, once given over to God were not lives of fame and comfort, but rather, in service to God, alongside the joy, hope and purpose, they all experienced doubt, rejection, loneliness, disappointment and pain.

She would know the stories of the brave women who came before her, of Rebecca's willingness to leave all she knew to begin a new life with Isaac, his people, and his God. She knew of Hagar's meeting with the angel in the wilderness, her willingness to go back to Abraham and Sarah in spite of the mistreatment she experienced there. She knew the stories of brave and fierce women like Esther, Deborah and Yael who unconventionally led their people into victory over their oppressors.

So, I would suggest that we not take her response to Gabriel's message, her consent, her "here I am Lord" lightly and I'm not sure where this characterization of Mary meek and mild comes from. The decision she made to consent to God was a bold decision made from the very depths of her God given grace.

Gabriel names her strength when he greets her "hail Mary full of Grace".

Her grace, her gift from God is her strong spiritual center. She responds not only from her head but ponders these things in her heart of hearts.

When she has had time to accept and absorb what she is risking...her life, her marriage, her reputation in her community... and to accept her new direction, she responds by singing her prophetic vision of God's plan. Her song reveals how deeply in sync she is with God's desire for the world.

Nancy Rockwell writes:

"Where an ordinary woman would dream of a child who would elevate her in this world, Mary dreams of a child who will liberate the lowly.

Where it might be commonplace to dream of a child whose glory would extend to the mother, Mary dreams of a child who will fill all the hungry with good things.

Where any mother might dream of a child who will grow up and be Somebody, Mary imagines a child who will knock all the Somebodies of this world off their thrones, who will scatter them in their false imaginations and raise the lowly in this new, true world." (1)

Her grace, then, emanates from her strong center. And this spiritual strength allows her to bravely consent to a new direction for her life, full of the unknown and full of promise for a great reversal.

She begins with "My soul magnifies the Lord". My soul enlarges God, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior. It is she herself in whom God is magnified. The Orthodox church recognizes this in their naming of Mary as the *Theotokos, the god bearer*.

I believe that God dwells within each one of us. This is not to say that we are God or that our innermost being is itself divine, but there is something within

each one of us in the place of our innermost being that is mysteriously interwoven with God.

This is the Divine Indwelling, Immanuel, God with us, the deep place that gives birth to Mary's song.

God is not only here on earth beside us, but God is everywhere, even within us.

Some have called this the divine spark, or call it a divine seed planted by our Creator that pulls us toward God, that sparks an awareness of God in ourselves and in the world around us. "This is the innermost point of our being, deeper than our thinking, deeper than our feeling, deeper than our normal sense of ourselves, our memories, our desires, deeper than our very presence." (2)

The medieval mystic Meister Eckhart says; "There is in the soul a something in which God dwells, and there is in the soul a something in which the soul dwells in God".

This is the something that responds with the divine "ah!" when we see a beautiful sky or hold a newborn child, or meet a messenger of God who reveals God's new direction for our lives.

Thomas Merton writes of this divine spark within us:

"It is like a pure diamond blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it, we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of the sun that would make all of the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely. I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere."

It is from this place that Mary's consent emanates, it gives her the courage to adopt the same kind of self emptying and God embracing attitude her son will embody years later in the Garden of Gethsemane when he says:

"Not my will be done, Oh Lord, but thine." Perhaps his first teacher for this kind of kenosis or self emptying came from his mother.

It is in this emptying of ourselves and in our reaching toward the divine within us that the riches of God's kingdom revealed to us by Jesus Christ.

Paul eloquently describes these riches in his letter to the Ephesians:

¹⁶I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

-Ephesians 3:16-19 (NIV)

It is my hope that this gift be extended to us all as we end this season of Advent and celebrate the coming of Immanuel, God with us.

Amen

1. Cynthia Bourgeault: "Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening"

2. Nancy Rockwell:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/fearlessness/#KGs3jPRLtrZZE8Bm.99>

3. Rev. Deon K. Johnson:

<http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2017/11/30/surprised-by-god-advent-4-december-24-2017/>

