

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year C
Date: 12/20/15
Season: Advent 4
Luke 1:39-56

Among my earliest childhood memories are of my mother reading stories to me at bedtime. Not always, but very often, those stories came from a children's illustrated Bible. I remember shuddering at the story of David in the lion's den and wondering if I would ever have such courage. I remember the story of Joseph being betrayed by his brothers and how kindly he treated them later when they were starving and wondering if I could be so kind and forgiving. And I remember the story of the boy Samuel being called by name in the middle of the night by the Lord, and wondering if God would ever call my name. My mother's sweet voice, in the melodic tones of old Virginia, told all those stories. Her voice was musical and those stories came to life for me, not just as stories from a time long ago and far away, they came alive for me as a gateway or a window into something beyond the stories. Because what any mom was really doing on those long ago nights was teaching me about love; about her love for me and about God's love for me. As I look back on it, I know I first experienced God's love through my mother's love. I experienced God as relationship, that is to say, not as a chilly abstract figure seated on a throne hurling lightning bolts in some distant kingdom.

And my mom taught me about justice. In our little southern town in the 50s and 60s there was a lot of racism, overt and covert. Not in our house. In our house, every human being was a child of God and stood equal before God. My mother was normally not a very fierce person, but on that subject she was very fierce indeed. I remember her father, my grandfather, also was a very formidable figure, at our dinner table once after he made a casually racist remark. "Not in my house and not at my table," mom said. My eight year old eyes got real big, I'll tell you.

And my mother taught me about repentance and mercy after my six-year-old self had been thoughtlessly cruel to one of the neighbor children who had a disability. When mom confronted me with how my behavior had caused pain to my neighbor, I was lower than a snake's belly, as we say in the south. While my neighbor accepted my apology for my dumb behavior, I continued to feel terrible about it until finally mom talked to me about having mercy for myself just like I would want to have mercy for others.

We've all got stories like this about our mothers, about how their love, their wisdom, their patience, and guidance, shaped us and formed us. That's, after all, a

mother's job. So why should Mary and Jesus be any different? You don't think Jesus didn't learn plenty from his mother?

In fact, I'll go so far as to say that a lot of what Jesus understood about his purpose in life came from his mother's understanding about how God was at work in her life. Here's an example of what I'm talking about. We hear this morning this beautiful story straight from Mary's heart. She's so grateful for this amazing work that God is doing in and through her and so she offers thanks and says, "My soul magnifies the Lord." She then goes on to describe God's mighty deeds:

He has shown strength with his arm

He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly

He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty

He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy

According to the promises he made to our ancestors.

Mary knows her Bible and she's praising the God she knows from her Bible and in her heart. Now listen to what her son says on the first day of his own public ministry. We'll be reading this a few Sundays from now. He stands up in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, opens a scroll from the prophet Isaiah and begins to speak:

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 recovering of sight to the blind

To let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor

Jesus didn't just make that stuff up. He's giving voice to how he was raised. It's what his mother taught him. It's the example she set for him. It's how she interpreted scripture. It's what his mother shared with him about the God she knew.

Can there be any doubt that the words we hear Mary speak this morning were important to her boy? They better be important to us too! She helped Jesus see who he was and who he was called to be so we might want to pay attention to ourselves.

And you know what? Mary's words this morning are words for our times. We couldn't hear more important words. We could take any line from her story and make that

into a powerful sermon that the world needs so badly to hear right now. I'm going to choose these words.

He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy according to the promises he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever.

In this Advent season, Mary comes to us this morning with a word we so badly need to hear. A word of the promise of God's mercy. I'll tell you, I need that right now. The remembrance of God's mercy. Can we recall what it's like to feel mercy? Well, even if we can't, God does. There's the promise Mary reminds us of.

The dictionary defines mercy this way: "kind or forgiving treatment of someone who could be treated harshly; it is kindness or help given to people in a very bad or desperate situation."

And so here's Mary. I suspect not much mercy had ever been extended to her. A poor girl, pregnant, living under Roman rule. Easy to dismiss her and reject her. Yet in her song she's giving witness to her experience of God's mercy, of how much it matters to her. She was cared for. She was lifted up. And because she was, so too will all the lowly. All the lowly will know God's promise.

Mercy seems to be in short supply right now. Maybe you feel like you could use a little mercy. Not an unusual experience. One sure way to receive mercy when you're in need of it, is to offer mercy to someone else who's in need of it. Who's in need of it. Who's maybe desperate for it. Who do you know who's alone right now? Who do you know who's feeling left out and rejected amidst all the holiday merry-making? They're out there. I'll bet there are some of us sitting right here who could use a little mercy.

And there are plenty of folks we don't know who could use a little mercy right now. We're going to have a visit in January from Greg Hope of our Diocesan Refugee Resettlement office to talk to us about what we can do to offer mercy to some pretty frightened, desperate people. Greg will be accompanied by some recent arrivals from Iraq and Afghanistan with whom the diocese is working so we can hear their stories and see how we can be instruments of God's mercy to struggling, scared neighbors.

Mercy. Mary knew it in her bones and she taught it to her boy. She incarnated mercy for him just like he does for us. Today.

So here's a thought exercise. Recall something **your** mother taught **you**. I don't mean what she taught you about keeping your room straight or doing all your homework. Those things are important, but I'm talking about something a little different. Recall a time your mother incarnated love for you. Acted it out. Or incarnated justice. Or incarnated mercy. How did that feel? How did it affect you? Now, how would you pass

that on? How would you pay it forward? Who can you imagine is in need of an act of your mercy? Where's a situation where you could do your part to bring justice to bear? Who's in need of your unconditional love that's not receiving any right now? What would your mother want you to do? And then do it. Just do it. Make your mother proud of you. Amen.