



Roanoke, Virginia
Second Sunday of Advent, December 10, 2017

“Mary’s Heart”

Luke 1:46-55
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I gave the Men’s Bible Study this past Wednesday morning, and what I usually run by them later turns into a sermon. This is *not* that sermon, but I’ll offer one small piece of what I said on Wednesday, and you might hear it again when I get around to preaching that sermon.

Desmond Morris wrote a book about homo sapiens – human beings – and he titled it, “The Naked Ape.” Morris could not have been more wrong in that title. We are the only species that clothes itself. Our clothes are our exterior appearance. They represent how we want to be seen by the world, and thus they stand for everything about culture: the degrees, the offices, the customs, and traditions. Clothes reveal that we have both exterior lives and interior ones.

Each of us has an inner press secretary whose responsibility it is to censor thoughts and feelings before expressing them. Admittedly, not everyone’s press secretary is as good as the next at doing the job, but except for a mental illness that causes one to lose discretion, everyone to some degree interprets, hides, protects, disguises, and sometimes misrepresents their inner self. It has to be this way. The world would not be blessed by having any one of us live unfiltered and uncensored lives. We can decide what to wear or what to say, but over the interior life, we have less control. In our thoughts and imaginations, we are not as mature, as politically correct, or as level-headed as we usually want others to think of ourselves as being. We try to control our feelings and our thoughts, but are never completely successful.

We usually carry on two conversations at one time. Imagine a city council meeting in . . . let’s say New Jersey . . . where the highly emotional issue of closing one of the High Schools is being discussed. There are lots of underlying issues: memories of those who attended there, potential cost savings, objections to favoring one neighborhood over another; one race over another. The seven council members sit up front for everyone to see. Susan, the council member sitting second from the right, is particularly good at looking interested without over-reacting even as some speakers raise their voices, this one yelling at one point, that one in tears. Observers marvel at Susan’s composure. She is, as they say, “an un-anxious presence.”

What they cannot see is her interior face; one moment a pout, the next a derisive laugh and a severe eye roll, the next a haughty look down the nose. At one point, when Susan is personally attacked for something the paper quoted her as saying, her outer face is that of a mature adult who could ignore the insults while paying attention to the issue, but the eyes of inner face brim with offense and tears. Call her two-faced if you want, but this is not only how everyone is, it is how we have to be.

Back in September 30, 1991, Time magazine published a review by Richard Corliss of two filmed stage shows of monologues: Lily Tomlin's, "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe" and Eric Bogosian's, "Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll." I never saw the two films being reviewed, but the review was worth reading on its own for its literary merit.

Corliss reflected on the running monologues that go on in all of our interior lives. He wrote:

"These conversations with ourselves are the endless, anarchic commentary running in our brains. They contain – just barely – our rage and desperation. They are the rough drafts of spoken discourse, the side trips into daydream irrelevancies, the lusts and prejudices left unsaid but so deeply felt. Ultimately, our interior monologues amount to a lifelong novel in progress, or perhaps the windiest suicide note. Transcribed, they could tell more about what we are than everything we do."

The secret dialogues of the heart "tell more about what we are than everything we do." I think that's OK, for some parts of us are no one's business but God's.

On occasion, two faces become one. There is shared between two people a moment of complete honesty. Or, one's grief cannot be contained, one's anger cannot be disguised, one's worry has to be expressed and the inner press secretary is overwhelmed.

We will hear one of those moments in our New Testament lesson. This passage is commonly called the "Magnificat." The name comes from the first line of a song Mary sings when she is greeted by Elizabeth; both of them pregnant, both of them bursting with joy. Mary's song exposes the joy of her inner life – her delight at having been granted a child though just a handmaiden, and her somehow getting the idea that this child is not just her good news but good news for her people. She sings:

'My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

Mary's interior face and exterior face are one.

Luke's Gospel contains more of those moments than the other Gospels. To illustrate what I mean by that, contrast Luke's Gospel with Mark's. Mark's Gospel is highly theological, but its reporting style like that of a newspaper; on the surface it is objective. Words are quoted, actions are reported, but you find little of the thoughts and feelings of the characters. The reader has to fill in the blanks as to what is felt and thought. One could say that Mark Gospel is told in something of the style of *Joe Friday*, the sergeant in the TV series *Dragnet* who was famous for saying, "Just the facts."

Luke's Gospel is different because it often gives glimpses and, sometimes, extended views of the interior life of its characters. For no one is this more the case than with Mary, the mother of Jesus. When the shepherds come to visit the Jesus after he is born, they tell Mary and Joseph all that they have seen and heard. They tell them that an angel appeared to them and announced that this child would be born and that they would find him like they just found him; wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. They tell of a multitude of angels filling the air singing their Hosannas. Mary listens to all the remarkable things the shepherds have to say and when they leave, we are told that Mary "keeps all of these things, pondering them in her heart."

Later, when Jesus is a teenager they make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Jesus wanders off and Mary and Joseph have to go looking for him. They find him in the Temple amazing rabbis with the depth of his questions and reflections. Again, we are told, Mary keeps these things, pondering them in her heart.

Those are just glimpses into this ongoing interior monologue going on within Mary as she ponders what Jesus means. She is a true theologian.

What is striking about Luke speaking of this interior monologue of Mary's heart is that of the four Gospels, Luke is also the most public; the most political and social. Luke is fond of dating events in the story by political references. A great example can be seen in the story of Christ's birth: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria." For Luke, Christ's birth is world news.

And there are the social ramifications. "Blessed are the poor," says Luke. Matthew's Gospel spiritualized that beatitude by quoting Jesus as saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Luke doesn't do that. He literally means the poor.

It is to poor, powerless, uncouth shepherds that the angel comes to say, "Unto you a child is born, unto you a son is given." In Jesus' inaugural message at the local synagogue in Nazareth, Luke reports him saying that he has come to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to captives, and liberate those who are oppressed. Jesus' views don't match those of his listeners and he is almost killed for expressing them.

There are many examples like this. Luke is the most political and social of the Gospels while also the most intimate of the Gospels.

Which brings us back to the Magnificat, Mary's song. The Magnificat is not a glimpse, but an extended monologue. Since, few – perhaps no one but Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, and Mary's fiancé Joseph – know anything of Mary's pregnancy, there is no more intimate moment in Luke than this one between two women sharing in private the good news of their pregnancies.

But, note the content of Mary's song. Mary rejoices over the social implications of her son's coming birth.

As if it were already accomplished, she sings that her son
has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.

As Mary sings, it's as if the interior life of all of Israel is expressed; as if all that had been prophesied by the prophets becoming true in this birth; a messiah – a leader – coming to restore peace in the world and justice in the community. Mary sings as if the good news is not just hers but belongs to all the world's poor, powerless, and oppressed. Though she is excited to be a handmaiden of the Lord, her heart is overjoyed for all but those who most need the messiah to come.

Mary is a mentor of authentic Christ-captured faith in her yearning for, hoping for, longing for, aching for, and at this moment rejoicing in God's coming is not about her but about the world.

Mary's song is evangelical. If there was ever a word that is misunderstood and abused in America, it is the word "evangelical." American evangelicalism has become trying to bring others to agree about belief. True evangelical faith is about spreading good news that makes a Gospel difference in both hearts (interior) and lives (social and political). After all, what being "evangelical" means at its core is this: *good news should be spread* and not hoarded for oneself. What is interior becomes exterior to the world.

American Methodists, at their best, had it right. American Methodists had it most right back in the early 1900s during the industrial revolution. Those who enjoy a social drink, buy a lottery ticket every now and then, or maybe play card games betting dimes and quarters, may be surprised to hear me say this because they are remembered for being so staunchly against drinking and gambling.

And they were. But remember their time. This was a time when the productive and capitalistic gains of the industrial revolution overwhelmed labor policies and practices. Coal miners and factory line workers worked long hours, for low pay, with little to no benefits, and no safety net if injury or disease rendered them useless to their employers. Many of the mine and assembly line workers aestheticized their hopelessness and anger with alcohol or paid sex, or sought diversions in gambling. What was needed at home was squandered, and what was brought home was ugly. Powerless at work, men often took out their frustrations on the powerless at home. Social drinkers and small stakes gamblers today might have no idea of how much wives and children suffered at home. The problems I described were widespread and severe.

The Methodists sang their Wesley hymns that spoke of hearts changed and lives saved. They preached their Wesley-style sermons that called for an emotional response even over an intellectual one; sermons that called people to conversion. They celebrated when people gave themselves up to Christ. But it had to mean something. That was made clear at the revivals. It meant husbands must go home to wives, earnings must go home for food and furniture, and sacrifices must be made by parents for children . . . not the other way around.

It did not stop with changed lives at home, but those Methodists pushed for changes at work and in the community too. We might not agree with all their causes, some thinking, for

instance, that the push for prohibition was misguided. But the same passion for prohibition was also the passion that strove for humane working conditions in factories and women's right to vote, to work, to be treated with dignity. Somehow the Methodists knew about society what they knew about home: that those who had the power and the means needed to bring hope, not more misery, to those who needed them.

No movement is perfect, but what can we learn from those Methodists. Maybe that Mary's song is not just an interior prayer; that Christian liberation begins in hearts and leads to the world; that a line can be drawn from truly transformed hearts to transformed communities. The Reformation began in Martin Luther's heart but spread across Europe and reached these shores. The powerful social work of Dorothy Day on behalf of the poorest of the poor began with her as an agnostic being shocked to realize that she loved Jesus . . . passionately. The Rescue Mission here in Roanoke, with all its transformative ministries, began when a drunk stopped drinking because he believed a verse of scripture a preacher gave him to live by. He later founded the mission.

The Gospel is not good news "on the face of things," clothing to trick the world. It is the working of justice and peace in the interior of things – the interior of hearts and the interior of communities. It is being part of the answer to the prayer that God's will be done in earth as it is in heaven.

I am praying for peace in our world right now. I might sound old school, but that prayer is intensely for miracles to be worked in minds and hearts where real peace – the peace of which Mary sings will begin in humbled hearts and minds of those who have the ability to do something for those *for whom* Mary sings – the poor and powerless. And may our interior, hidden lives be open to, and transformed by, God's love and mercy in Christ so that if others could actually glimpse what we really think and feel, they will glimpse something besides the selfishness and greed that we already know is there; that they will glimpse something of what we saw in Mary's heart; a passion that God do for others what we hope for ourselves.

To God be glory, and honor and praise. To the God born to Mary, laid in a manger – the God who emptied himself on behalf of the entire world, be glory, and honor, and praise.