

Imagine
Luke 1:46-55

Today's scripture is about Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her famous words that are known to many of us as the Magnificat. This is one of the few times in the year when we Presbyterians talk about Mary and her role in the story of Jesus. Because of Reformed history, Mary for most Protestants is a minor character. We can get lost in the debates about whether Mary was truly a virgin or whether she had other children or not. Was her virginity perpetual or not? But these kinds of questions and debates miss the real point behind the story of Mary.

The traditions around Mary and the virgin birth are weak in the Presbyterian Church, but the value of her story and faith are very much part of our Christian story that we cherish. Biblical scholar Marcus Borg writes, "The truly important questions about the birth stories are not whether Jesus was born of a virgin, or whether there was an empire -- wide census that took Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, or whether there was a special star leading wise men from the East. The important questions are, "Is Jesus the light of the world? Is he the true Lord? Is what happened in him 'of God'?" Answering these questions lays claim to our whole lives."

So, the same is true of our understanding of the importance of Mary's words which we read today from Luke 1. These words have become so familiar to us but their true meaning and power are not as familiar to many of us. We have domesticated the radical nature of these words. William Barclay, an English theologian, says that the Magnificat is "a bombshell" and has "revolutionary terror." It takes "the standards of the world and turns them upside down." Barclay teaches that in the Magnificat, there are three revolutions: "an economic revolution; a political revolution; and a moral revolution." It is said that the Magnificat "terrified the Russian Czars." In the Magnificat, God totally changes the order of things. God takes that which is on the bottom and puts it on top and the top on the bottom. God revolutionizes the way we think, the way we act, and the way we live. Most of us are impressed with money, power, beauty, and education. But God revolutionizes all of that. The poor are put on the top; the rich are put on the bottom. The Magnificat clearly tells us of *God's compassion* for the economically poor. There are five important verbs in Mary's words that we need to pay attention to: God *regards* or respects the poor, *exalts* the poor, *feeds* the poor, *helps* the poor, *remembers* the poor. God chooses Mary who is a slave girl to be the mother of Jesus. God does not choose a princess or a powerful woman. God chooses a thirteen year-old girl who was part of an oppressed group of people, the Jews who were occupied by the Romans. Girls in that part of the world are not regarded in high esteem even till this day. They were considered to be the property of their fathers and later on of their husbands. The Greek word *doulos* describes Mary in this chapter in Luke as a slave. So, God exalted a slave girl to fulfill God's purposes of love. Yet, something was truly unique about Mary. The whole Christ event took place because Mary was in touch with something other than her calculating mind. Her imagination and her ability to see visions were strong and alive in her. Her imagination was powerful enough to allow her to catch the vision of God for the world. Even though no human mind would have imagined Christ coming into the world through the faith of a lowly young woman, Mary's imagination was big enough to see beyond our human limitations.

In his book, *The Good Book*, Peter Gomes, Minister of Memorial Church at Harvard, writes that the Bible is "a book of the imagination." Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann says that the Bible "funds the imagination." The primary task of our faith is helping us step out and let go of our limited views of the world. We are a people who often lack in our imagination. We are more focused on the day-to-day tasks and facts of life. When we hear people talking about vision or peace and justice in our world, we think of them as pipe dreams. We only allow our imagination out in literature, movies and art. But when it comes to the daily realities of life, we have been

trained to “get real.” In fact, the way we use the word imagination is mostly negative. “It is only your imagination.” If Mary was your young cousin today who came to you with this tall tale about God wanting her to be the mother of the Savior of the world, how would you react? Would you believe that God would use someone that young and that insignificant to bring such drastic change to the world? Do you have the imagination and vision for this amazing work of the Spirit?

Don: Well, I am sitting here getting uncomfortable hearing about imagination. What if I used my imagination to see negative things? Not that I would do that? But, what if?

Roula: But Don, this is not the kind of imagination I am talking about.

Don: Have you not heard the story about the salesman and his imagination?

Roula: No, I have not, would you care to share?

Don: A salesman, driving on a lonely country road one dark and rainy night had a flat tire. He opened the trunk--no lug wrench. The light from a farmhouse could be seen dimly up the road. He set out on foot through the driving rain. Surely the farmer would have a lug wrench he could borrow, he thought. The salesman began to use his imagination. He thought to himself, of course, it was late at night--the farmer would be asleep in his warm, dry bed. Maybe he wouldn't answer the door. And even if he did, he'd be angry at being awakened in the middle of the night. The salesman, picking his way blindly in the dark, stumbled on. By now his shoes and clothing were soaked. Even if the farmer did answer his knock, he would probably shout something like, "What's the big idea waking me up at this hour!" This thought made the salesman angry. What right did that farmer have to refuse him the loan of a lug wrench? After all, here he was stranded in the middle of nowhere, soaked to the skin. The farmer was a selfish clod--no doubt about that! The salesman finally reached the house, and banged loudly on the door. A light went on inside, and a window opened above. "Who is it?" a voice called out. "You know darn well who it is," yelled the salesman, his face white with anger. "It's me! You can keep your blasted lug wrench. I wouldn't borrow it now if you had the last one on earth!" So, Roula, how do you like that for imagination?

Roula: That is an interesting way of using your imagination. But this is exactly what our spiritual imagination can heal. We often think in negative or even limited ways. The imagination and vision of God call us to a creative process of trusting that a whole new outcome or stories are possible in our lives. This is hard to believe with our logical mind, but through faith we know that nothing is impossible for God. Albert Einstein once said that “Logic will get you from A to B. Imagination will take you everywhere.”

United Methodist bishop and theologian William Willimon tells the story of a college student talking to him about how the virgin birth was just too incredible to believe. Willimon responded, "You think that's incredible, come back next week. Then, we will tell you that 'God has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.' We'll talk about the hungry having enough to eat and the rich being sent away empty. The virgin birth? If you think you have trouble with the Christian faith now, just wait. The virgin birth is just a little miracle; the *really* incredible stuff is coming next week."

Our world does not need more people who can control things and complete tasks. Our world needs more people who are able to dream and imagine a future that can only be brought on by the power of the Spirit. The power of imagination is the ultimate creative power and our world needs it desperately. One dramatic example of the power of vivid imagination is that of Air Force Colonel George Hall. He was a POW locked in the dark box of a North Vietnamese prison for seven hard years. Every day Hall played a full game of golf in his imagination. One week after he was released from his POW camp he entered the Greater New Orleans Open and shot a 76.

Last July a fake New York Times issue was published and circulated to help people for one day to image a different world that is so different from our world today. The headlines of this paper were positive but shocking, "Iraq War Ends" and "Nation Sets its Sights on Building a Sane Economy," "the abolition of corporate lobbying," "a pay ceiling for CEOs," and 'a recall for all petrol-fueled cars.' This bogus newspaper was an invitation to imagine a different world and a different kind of news instead of the normal diet of depressing stories delivered by the media industry. Thousands of commuters were momentarily tricked by their normal daily paper bearing only reports of positive events and happenings, supported by advertisements promising only truth and justice. A careful reading noted that the paper's traditional motto of "all the news that's fit to print" was rendered "all the news we hope to print". The convincing spoof was the latest in a series of satirical protests by an anti-consumerist group, the Yes Men. The amazing thing is that this paper resonated with the people who read it. The creators of this paper said that "First there was a moment of, 'How could this be true?' But then people enjoyed this feeling of, 'Ah, amazing things really could happen.' The paper provides this vision of what's possible if we all work together."

Advent is a time for dreaming big dreams, and so we ask ourselves: What if this Mary kind of world was our focus? What if we studied the Bible and the work of the Spirit in our lives to be led to always believe in this positive imagination of our world? Would we be able to accept that God uses anyone and turns our standards upside down? Are we willing to receive from whomever God chooses as a vehicle for revelation? What if it is someone we don't hold in high esteem? What if it is someone who is otherwise marginalized by society and the circles of power? What if it is you? Are you ready to imagine with God such a world? Are you ready for such a revolution?