

I stumbled across a quote earlier this week and it's been bouncing around like an earworm ever since: 'Love isn't how you feel. It's what you do.'¹ I've heard many different iterations of this idea through the years, but as I've been sitting with and meditating on the Song of Mary, it struck a nerve. I've been thinking about the unique character of Mary's faithful 'YES!' to God.

My husband Hayne and I were watching a drama the other night where the parents asked their child to help with some task, and the surly teenager quipped back, "I don't feel like it" as they turned and walked away. I felt my brows shoot up, my eyes bug out. And in that first fraction of a second, I considered what might have happened had I said something like that to one of my parents. 'I don't feel like it.' **It would not have gone well.**

And as much as I was appalled at what this child said, the reality is that 'I don't feel like it' is a familiar response to many of God's requests of me.

But not so for Mary. She meets God's seemingly impossible invitation with a question, "How can this be?"² and follows that up with, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."³

I can't quite underscore enough what a hard situation Mary found herself in following that invitation. The Romans had occupied the land, taxing the people to such an extent that nearly everyone was impoverished. Herod's taxes were sucking the life out of his people ~ taxes that built the temple, yes, but that also cost the poor their land, concentrating wealth for the top few percent and leaving the masses impoverished. I read that Herod's practices and policies were so brutal that 'he knew people would party when he died, so he supposedly had 70 prominent, faithful Jewish citizens imprisoned with

¹ *A Wind in the Door*

² Luke 1:34

³ Luke 1:38

orders that they be executed on the day of his death so that [he could be assured] there would be tears in Israel.’⁴

Mary, a woman with no legal or financial means of her own, without standing in the community, with limited resources and few if any opportunities, is unwed. Engaged, yes ~ to a man at least twice her age, which was normal, of course. But now she is pregnant.

I can’t help but wonder, how did that conversation go? “Uh, Joseph? An angel visited me. His name was Gabriel. Nice guy. He said I was to be overshadowed and that I will birth the long-awaited messiah in about 9 months’ time. And, well, I’ve decided I’m going to go begin my confinement at my cousin’s house in Hebron, about 100 miles away. Bye.” [... Yes, dear...] It seems Mary wasn’t the only one with enormous faith.

Love isn’t how you feel. It’s what you do.

At this point we pick up this morning’s Gospel reading, where the scene is set with five characters on stage: Zechariah, the priest in their presence, the one who has been theologically trained and whose voice commands the attention of those who seek to understand ... he stands by, unable to speak, thanks to his own angelic visitation.

The other four in this Gospel scene are unlikely prophets, gathered (not in a wilderness this time) but just inside Elizabeth and Zechariah’s front door. Two are unborn and have a powerful message they will eventually deliver, and the other two are women ~ women who cannot contain the almost-unbelievable stories they have to tell. Women with something to say ... or in Mary’s case, sing. For this pivotal scene, Luke has crafted his script, if you will, to highlight the voices of the women, echoes of which we will hear in their sons’ words as the Good News unfolds. The tables have turned.

First we hear from Elizabeth. She and Zechariah are described as righteous before God, blameless in observing the commandments and regulations of the Lord.⁵ Elizabeth straddled the respectable/unrespectable divide in her community. She

⁴ John Ortberg, *Christian Century*, 12-15-09

⁵ Luke 1:6

was respected as the wife of a priest, but was also in a position of shame as she had not borne a child.

As Mary enters her home, Elizabeth does not rebuke this unwed, teen mother-to-be who suddenly shows up for an extended stay. Rather, as John leaps in utero with the knowledge and awareness of the presence of the One who is greater, Elizabeth is the first to recognize her cousin, her friend, her sister in faith as the God-bearer, the holy mother of her Lord. “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”⁶ Elizabeth casts no shade: there is no blame, no concern of what others might think of her family, no furtive whispers or attempts to ignore the situation at hand ~ just awe and love and faith and recognition of God’s presence in their lives. [Were that all of our family reunions could be like this...]

In response, Mary’s joy bubbles forth as she sings

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts 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...

It’s a love song about God bringing the fullness of time into perfection as though it has already happened. The truth of the child she carries is the reality of God’s Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven ~ as it always has been and always will be. Again, we see the looping nature of God’s timeline: already / not yet.

Mary sings not just for Elizabeth and Zechariah but ‘for every son and daughter who thought God has forgotten the promise to be with them forever, to love them forever, to give them fresh and endless life.’⁷ A life in which the first become last and the last, first.

Things aren’t as they should be in our age, either, even without Herod-the-so-called-Great. Children still go to bed hungry and scared; the poor continue to be beaten down by systems rigged against them; the underclass continues to be voiceless with limited opportunities and minimal access to resources. Meanwhile there are disproportionately more resources and opportunities for those who already have enough and more than enough to live comfortably.

⁶ Luke 1:42

⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, 17.

Love isn't how you feel. It's what you do.

And so Mary's song is a song for those of us who dream of a time when suffering of every kind will end and everyone will have enough and everyone will be *deemed* enough *in themselves*. When nations and families will live in peace and the earth will be restored and healed of the damage that has been done.⁸

When God sent Jesus to the world to reconcile all things, his incarnation and work on the cross did the job once for all. Salvation put an end to the world's injustices and oppressions. But as humans we aren't able to be transformed all at once ~ that desire is what got Adam and Eve kicked out of the Garden. God works gradually in our lives and in our world, helping us grow up into the hope that is already here.⁹

I thank God that Mary didn't walk away from Gabriel with a surly teenage shrug and declare that she 'didn't feel like it.'

No, Mary trusted so profoundly in the reality of the baby she carried that she asserted God's fulfillment of hope in the past, present and future. In this quickly approaching season of celebrating God's act of Incarnate Love, may we, like Mary, magnify the Lord for already having overcome injustice and oppression, suffering and despair—even as we work to end such evils.

As followers of Jesus the Christ, love isn't about how we feel. It's what we do.

⁸ Adapted from Kate Huey.

⁹ Adapted from Julie Clawson, Christian Century, Dec22, 2010