**Mary’s Song**

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Some of you probably remember the best meal you have ever had.

Of the best movie you ever saw.

Or maybe the most beautiful sight your eyes ever beheld.

As for me, I have some ideas about those things.

But one thing I remember for sure, was the best sermon I ever heard.

And it was based on this scripture.

And it was at a funeral.

I was a second year student at Union Seminary and I had a part time job working in the chapel. One afternoon I was called in to operate the sound board for a memorial service. It was a community memorial for a retired professor of Christian Social Ethics at the school, who had retired before I ever arrived. A woman named Beverly Harrison.

Dr. Harrison taught at Union for 30 years, she wrote many landmark works in feminist christian ethics. And she was the first woman to ever serve as the President of the North American Society of Christian Ethics.

My preaching professor Barbara Lundblad had been chosen to give the sermon for her Memorial Service. And she chose this passage, where Mary (pregnant with Jesus) goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth (who is pregnant with John the Baptist). And Elizabeth, upon hearing Mary’s greeting, feels her child leap in her womb.

Now one of Bev Harrison’s greatest contribution to the field of ethics was the idea of embodied revelation.

The field of Christian Social Ethics had long depended on the model of a stayed, objective distance. Ethical problems were intellectual problems. To be thought about, and solved like math puzzles.

Classical academic Christian ethics depended on a clear separation between thoughts and emotions. Emotions, they believed, had no place in rational reflection about ethical issues.

In contrast, Dr. Harrison proposed an embodied approach to ethics. One that took emotional, and visceral experiences seriously as a source of divine revelation. She imagined that God did not only seek to change our minds, but God’s spirit moved in our hearts.

That love, and relationship, were meant to be entered with our whole hearts that we might come to feel, and know in our very bodies, what love truly is.

That anger was not meant to be repressed, but experienced as a sign for God that something was not right.

That tending to the bonds of community, doing the basic works of love, was more likely to expose us to God’s presence then any amount of sitting alone, and reading, high in some ivory tower, could ever do.

And so, her memorial service featured this story. About Elizabeth, who first experiences Christ’s presence in her body. Who comes to know God not through words, but through a visceral encounter, when her own child leaps in her womb at Mary’s greeting.

The preacher reminded us what Dr. Harrison taught. That the feelings we have are a source of divine revelation. That faith is something that comes more often as a jump in our gut, or a stirring in our heart, than as an idea in our head.

She told us that: the most powerful. experience of God’s presence is visceral, not intellectual. It is nearly impossible to think your way into faith. Elizabeth feels it. She feels it in her very body, and she knows.

I remember the sermon because it opened something back up in me that was perhaps beginning to get clogged up with all my books. It re-opened my heart to the ways that I would come to know God’s love through my experience of life in the world.

And that is part of why I want to focus on Mary this Advent. Because this season can come across as very cosmic. It can feel full of ideas that are too big to digest. Visits from Angels and Incarnation. The Word Made Flesh. Emmanuel. God with us.

But the story has such a beautiful human side too. A poor woman from a forgotten corner of the world bearing child. Her cousin, who could feel in her bones that something special was about to happen.

And for her part, Mary sings. Mary proclaims in poetic beauty what she has come to know in her own heart. That something special is about to happen indeed. That her child will cause empires to crumble, and kings to fall from their thrones, that the poor will be filled as the rich are emptied, that the proud will be sent scattering, and the lowly lifted up.

It’s the kind of amazing ethical imagination that almost would not be possible to simply think up. These are not ideas. They are not proposals.

They are visions. They are dreams. They are the longings, and hopes, that are emerging not from the halls of power, but from the lived experience of a poor woman in a forgotten corner of the world.

I had the occasion as I was preparing this sermon to go back and read some of Bev Harrison’s work, as I was remembering how important her memorial service had been to me.

I found this one line that I really loved.

She wrote: “The location of divine revelation is in the concrete struggles of communities to lay hold of the gift of life, and unloose all that thwarts life.”

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That is to say, we come to know what we know about God when we work together to build communities of love and justice, and when we work together to oppose all that seeks to thwart love.

We learn what we know about God through the act of creating a community of love.

It’s somewhat backward from how we might normally think about it. I know that for me, I often think that we come to believe in God and that belief inspires us to build communities of love. Harrison says no, we start with the acts of love, and through those acts we come to know who God is.

We learn who God is viscerally, through our experience, through our emotions, and our lived life.

That’s what happened for Mary and Elizabeth. They came to know about God because their own bodies stirred and leapt with joy and anticipation. And their hearts filled with visions of justice and peace.

And it is true that what we come to know about God in this season we experience viscerally.

Its that sensation that wells up in your thought when the lights all dim and the candles are lit and the congregation sings Silent Night.

Or maybe it is the grief and loss that you feel so acutely this time of year, that while painful, is an experience that reminds you why it is the world needs a savior.

Or maybe it is the way that your deepest hopes for the world spur you to take action on behalf of the vulnerable.

Or maybe it is that sensation in your heart when you have an opportunity to be generous with someone you love. Or someone you scarcely know.

I have a mentor who once told me that in his early years of ministry he found it hard to have an experience of Christmas. Because the evening was so packed full of services, it felt hectic, and rushed, and by the time he got home he just collapsed.

So every year he tried and tried to make Christmas meaningful again. He spent extra time reading scripture, he prayed and prayed, he read books, and devotionals. He meditated on the meaning of it all. And nothing seemed to work.

But then one year, on Christmas Eve, at the last service in the evening, having preached his sermon, and said his prayer, he stood and looked out over the congregation as they raised their candles high and sang silent night.

And in that moment, he says, Christmas happened. He felt it. Deep down. Hard to describe, but he just knew it was true, and somehow his heart filled with hope.

We are getting closer to Christmas here too. And the pews are filling in. And the work of the church is gaining steam. And that’s great, because I think the best chance we have of really encountering the God who is coming to dwell with us is right here, not in this room, or this building, but in this community, as we strive together to build a community of love and justice, as we work to bring love to life, and oppose all that seeks to thwart love.

As we each lift or single light in to the dark night, and sing together in that bright moment.

Maybe, just maybe, we will meet the God who has come to save the world.

There would be no talking you into it.

But you might feel it. You might feel something deep down. And in the moment, really know, that something special is about to happen.