

# North Kildonan United Church

19<sup>th</sup> December 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

*Luke 1:39-45*

*Luke 1:46-55*

*O God, beginning and end, by whose command time runs its course: bless our impatience, perfect our faith, and, while we await the fulfillment of your promises, grant us hope in your Word. Amen.*

For years the Cannes Film festival best commercials of the year would be shown at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. The programme consisted of a collection of the funniest, most clever commercials created around the world, very, very few of which would ever appear on Canadian Television.

One commercial in particular remains in my memory. It was created sometime in the 1980s to advertise Heinz Baked Beans.

The scene opens with a very proper young girl, her hair carefully arranged and sitting at a kitchen table. Everything suggests the 1940s and Elgar type music plays in the background. Her mother places a plate of Heinz Beans in front of the girl.

The girl says: "I wonder, if I eat enough Heinz Baked Beans, do you think that I could become" she pauses and looking determined says: "Prime Minister?"

Her mother replies: "You just might Margaret." Her smile turns to a frown and as she takes the plate away from her daughter she says, with a look of fear and worry in her face: "You just might." The narrator ends the commercial by saying: "Millions of little Britons have grown up great, knowing that Beanz Meanz Heinz."

History does not record Margaret Thatcher's reaction to this portrayal of herself, though one would hope she might see the humour in it.

Like Margaret's mother, I'm sure all mothers wonder how their children will turn out as they grow up.

We sort of have this wondering played out in today's reading from St Luke. Wondering may not be the right word. Perhaps joy and promise are more accurate.

Our reading begins with Mary, filled with excitement and joy and still pondering the depths of her encounter with the angel Gabriel. In haste, as the gospel says, Mary journeys to visit her relative Elizabeth, who is well along in her pregnancy, carrying the one who will be known as John the Baptist.

Tom Wright, in his translation, more fully brings out the power of this passage. He writes: "*Mary got up then and there, and went in excitement to the hill country of Judaea. She went into Zechariah's house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard*

*Mary's greeting, the baby gave a leap in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and shouted at the top of her voice:*

*'Of all women, you're the blessed one! And the fruit of your womb-he's blessed too! Why should this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Look-when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the child in my womb gave a great leap for joy! A blessing on you, for believing that what the Lord said to you would come true!'"*

We can but imagine the overwhelming joy and delight Mary and Elizabeth were experiencing. St Luke puts this excitement into the song which follows, the Song of Mary, also known as the Magnificat, which begins:

*"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour."* The song continues, proclaiming the wonderful deeds Jesus will accomplish. It reads almost like a mission statement but more complex.

So why does Mary sing such a song? As Tom Wright points out, Mary and Elizabeth shared a dream, which was the ancient dream of Israel, the dream that one day all that the prophets had said would come true. The dream that one day all nations would be blessed through Abraham's family. But in order for that to happen, the powers that kept the world in slavery had to be overturned. God would defeat the bullies, if you will, the power-brokers, the forces of evil such as the brutality of Rome and its local enforcer, Herod the Great. Mary and Elizabeth, like many Jews of their time, would have known the scriptures, would have known those psalms and prophetic writings which speak of mercy, hope, fulfilment, revolution, victory over evil, God coming to the rescue at last. Hear again a section from the Song of Mary.

*"You took action with a strong arm.  
You scattered the proud in their conceit.  
You pulled the mighty from their thrones.  
You raised the lowly.  
You filled the hungry with good things.  
You sent the rich away empty.  
You come to the aid of your servant, Israel,  
for you remembered your promise of mercy,  
to our ancestors, Abraham and Sarah,  
and to their children in every age."*

A song of hope and promise, a song that has been repeated down through the ages, bringing encouragement to God's people.

And Mary and Elizabeth knew that God was going to bring this dream to life through their sons, through Jesus and his cousin John the Baptist.

The Song of Mary reminds us that the Christmas story is about more than a baby born in a manger, more than shepherds hearing heavenly choirs and marvelling at the beauty of the infant Jesus, more than wise men following a star and bringing exotic gifts. The innocent baby will grow up to be a man who challenges the strongest powers on earth, who calls those who will listen to live lives based on love and forgiveness and trust and hope. The poor and the vulnerable are not forgotten by God. No, they are loved all the more by God. The Song of Mary is a declaration that the values of this world, the values that discriminate and separate and dismiss so many are to be turned upside down by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As we have been singing in the refrain of *Hope Is a Star* "When God is a child there's joy in our song. The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong, and none shall be afraid."

Let's spend a bit more time with Mary, since she receives little attention in our Protestant approach. Down through the centuries Mary has been portrayed as a noble woman, an aristocrat at times, with golden hair and pale skin, perhaps more Nordic than Near Eastern. Often she might be depicted as seated on a throne, with a crown, holding her son Jesus, also looking quite royal. In medieval times, and since then in some circles, Mary would be venerated as a Queen, a very northern European looking monarch. A very non-Jewish looking mother, yet another instance of the anti-Semitism that has plagued the church through the centuries.

So if we put aside the Mary of the art world, the Mary of paintings and sculptures and icons and so on, and search for the Mary of the Bible, what might we find?

How about a sun-burned woman with calluses on her hands from all the hard work she did? She is Jewish, steeped in Jewish customs and teachings and no doubt proud to be Jewish. She is probably a peasant woman, hard-working, worried about money problems, about domestic issues and worried about her oppressed people.

We always see her as a mother, while forgetting she was also a wife. There is no reason to think that she and Joseph didn't have a long and happy married life together, holding hands when out for walks, enjoying each other's company, entertaining friends and relatives. What if artwork presented them as a couple, instead of painting Joseph out of every picture?

Our lesson today also gives us an insight into the heart of Mary, into her kindness and compassion. After her encounter with Gabriel, she was understandably eager to share her news with Elizabeth. But her visit was about more than that, important though her news was.

Mary went to care for Elizabeth. Elizabeth was of a good age, as they say, and she had three months left of her pregnancy. That would not have been an easy time for an older woman to cope with, without help. We are told that Mary remained with Elizabeth

for about three months, presumably until Elizabeth delivered her son, and then Mary returned home.

It's important to remember that Mary's care of her older relative was an essential element of Jewish religious practice. So we have Mary, now pregnant herself, making a journey to go help someone else, her relative Elizabeth, going when it would have been so much easier to stay home.

Joseph Kelly, in his book The Birth of Jesus According to the Gospels says this, which puts things into perspective.

*"The modern cult of youth often relegates the elderly off to the side, but the ancient world prized the elderly-not, as is often thought, for their supposed wisdom but because they were family, a link to previous and unknown generations and progenitors of generations to come. And, very often, people simply in need of assistance, which we, like Mary, should provide."*

Blessed be Mary, mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.