

Mary's Song of Revolution December 18, 2011 (Jennifer Ferguson)

The story of Jesus' nativity is such a wondrous sweet story. At first hearing it seems like a benign, innocent children's story full of lovely angel visitations, an immaculate conception, a dutiful daughter of God, an obedient man of God, and the birth of a beautiful boy who will save the world from its own sinfulness. It is a story often told by children dressed up in pajama robes and crooked gold wings and sequin glued crowns with proud parents and grandparents laughing at the antics of the tiny players. But this story is far from innocent. In fact it is not a children's story at all, it is a very adult story, a call to revolution – an inner revolution which invariably leads to an outer revolution. Because if you undergo a soul change on the inside, people on the outside are eventually bound to take notice and not be very happy about it.

In fact this song about Jesus' birth calls for two revolutions – first – a SOUL REVOLUTION – the turning of a human heart to God. Mary sings – “my soul magnifies the Lord and rejoices in God my saviour”. In this song, Mary's heart, her soul, her very being has been expanded to be filled with the glory and the mind of God. She celebrates God becoming fully alive in her, she is pregnant with the purposes of God. Her soul magnifies God, that is her soul expands God's presence and will on the earth. She no longer lives for herself, she lives for God. She no longer has ego needs that need to be met, her soul is only for the highest good of all.

Richard Rohr, a Roman Catholic Franciscan brother has written several books, but his last one *Falling Upward* talks about the expansion of the soul as the purpose of our second half of life. The first half of our life we spend our time strengthening our ego, gaining a sense of our

skills and gifts, discovering who we are, attaining security in the world, defining ourselves and carving out an identity, establishing significant relationships, starting a family and ensuring our survival. In the second half of life, we are called to do the “task within the task” and undertake the work of strengthening our soul by allowing our ego self to fall and fail, for our hearts to be broken open, our dreams dashed and our necessary losses experienced to make room for our souls to expand and become more and more in the likeness of God. He writes, “God knows that all of us will fall somehow. Those events that lead us to “catastrophize” out of all proportion must be business as usual for God – at least 6 billion times a day. Like good spiritual directors do, God must say after each failure of ours, say “O, here is a great opportunity! Let’s see how we can work with this --and the falling becomes the standing. The stumbling becomes the finding. The dying becomes the rising. He claims that until and unless we give our life away to others, we do not seem to have it ourselves at any deep level”. And that is what he refers to as a “falling upward”. As the mystic Julian Norwich puts it: “first there is the fall, then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God.”

The story of Mary and Joseph are people who have had to let go of their own dreams and plans for their lives, their own ego survival plans and have begun the soulful journey of allowing the holy to be fully pregnant or present in their own souls. Mary risks loss of ego and survival being disowned by her own family, her own reputation in the community, she breaks the law and risks stoning by becoming pregnant, Joseph risks taking Mary as his wife who is already pregnant clearly by someone else and willing to take the child on as his own to protect Mary. They risk their lives trusting that God is somehow in this new turn in their lives. That is what makes this story so full of wonderment – that this man and woman have

listened to the dreams of God instead of their own and have stepped out in faith and trust that God is making something wondrous of their lives for the sake of their people who are living under an oppressive occupied Roman government. How many of us have learned to trust God that deeply? How many of us are willing to fail and fall, to lose ourselves in order to find what is most holy within us?

The story of Jesus is a story about failing and falling from his birth, to his being misunderstood by his disciples, being betrayed by his closest friends, of being a failed king of the Jews, by being tortured and punished like a criminal and dying an early death as a public disgrace. The story of Jesus from start to finish is a story of risking and failing and falling. It is not a story of success in our eyes, until God makes it so. The story of Jesus is the story of a soul expansion -- of a human being who came into the world like we all come into the world full of promise and potential and actually allowing his ego to be crucified in order to make room for his soul to be magnified and expanded to be so completely full of the divine that others experience him as holy. And that is why we call him Messiah or Christ which mean Anointed One, Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of Peace. So this song sings a song about our first revolution Mary's soul revolution.

The second revolution of this song is a political and social revolution. Mary speaks about God turning the world's values upside down and of the poor coming into power and the rich being turned away empty handed. This is why in some Latin American churches the government has actually banned the reading of this scripture in church because they have seen it as the Christian's call to social action and political revolution. As the bible says – see

how they have gone after him, he will turn the world upside down. To be a true Christ follower is being willing to turn the world's values upside down. It is about being willing to take political and social and economic risks, but we don't get that. I think we don't want to get that because it takes us out of our comfortable lives and makes us unpopular and controversial. A couple of weeks ago, a member of our church came up to talk about how going down to City Hall and listening to the concerns of Occupy Calgary turned her life upside down and her soul inside out. And some thought her talking about politics in church was inappropriate, but talking about a social revolution in church is highly appropriate – she was right on the mark – listen to Mary's Song – it celebrates the coming of Jesus into the world coming for the poor and the oppressed, about turning the unjust economic and social structures upside down and inside out. Now I don't know if Occupy movement is a God movement yet – it is too early to tell, but it is a call to question our present economic and social structures.

Oscar Romero was the Archbishop in El Salvador. He began life as a typical priest and was considered a conservative who wouldn't rock the boat of either the Catholic Church or the Salvadorian government. He was obedient to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and then he began to listen to his own people, witnessed their abject poverty and the government terrorism and murders and persecution of their own people. He underwent a soul revolution. He risked his own reputation and ecclesiastical standing by speaking out for the rights of the poor. He began to break some of the laws of his church and he began to criticize the government for its oppression of the people. One day he was serving mass in his local congregation and while he was lifting the chalice, he was shot by a government official

and his own blood spilled over the communion table as the wine of Christ poured out of the chalice. Oscar Romero took Mary's words to heart, "my soul magnifies the Lord... God 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."

Each of us can take to heart Mary's Song. I was speaking to a man in this congregation this week in hospital, who also takes Mary's song into his heart -- a man whom I consider to be one of the saints of the church who said, "it makes me angry when people who have wealth don't share it with those who don't. People think that they have earned their own wealth; they don't realize it comes as a gift from God -- that they were in the right place at the right time because God put them there and they have a responsibility to give back." He reiterates what Rohr says when he says, "All we can give back and all God wants from any of us is to humbly and proudly return the product that we have been given -- which is ourselves." Our friend in the hospital gets it, he has a man who has some wealth who is always generous with his gifts from God and is willing to share it for holy purposes beyond his own. He is one of those people who has undergone his own soul revolution, his soul has been expanded and so he understands the need for the second social revolution. We are blessed by people like that in this congregation, people who understand the call of the true follower of Christ. When I encounter you, I leave your presence in a state of wonderment.

Today we have listened to the wondrous story of angels and Mary and Joseph and the birth of a baby into the world. It is not a child's story, it is a very adult story, that calls us to spiritual adult maturity. If we can hear this story with new ears maybe our own souls can

begin their revolutionary turn and we too can be filled with the presence of the holy and our souls magnified. And when that happens – look out world, you just might be turned upside down this Christmas. May it be so. Amen.

