



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

From Obscurity to Blessedness

by The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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Plucked from obscurity is a favorite theme in literature and theater – I always think of Ruby Keeler in *42nd Street*, she played Peggy Sawyer – “a raw kid out of the chorus” who is grabbed two days (in the movie, it’s five hours) before opening curtain after the star breaks her ankle. The director grills her for hours – a scene full of “No! no! no! it’s all wrong!” And “I can’t do it!” Finally in an over the top moment before she makes her entrance, he grabs her by the shoulders and says her “You’re going out there a youngster but you’ve got to come back a star!” And of course, she does. She taps up a storm and saves the day. It’s very campy but there are some surprisingly profound moments of truth. The jealous, aging star, Dorothy Brock, hobbles in on her crutches and admits her jealousy and then gives Peggy a pep talk – telling her that it really is her time to be a star. Dorothy Brock, in true John the Baptist humility says “I must get out of your way.”

In all of this is the inevitability of Peggy’s stardom, clear from our side of the footlights but she has had enough of the back biting, the petty jealousies and just downright rotten way people treat each other in the theater. She’s not at all sure she wants any part of it. But when the call comes, she says “yes.” She steps up, in her tap shoes, to destiny.

Now I don’t want to demean the story of the annunciation by relocating it on 42nd Street but the language is very similar and in it we understand that Mary accepts the call to service. She is fully aware of the ridicule that will come her way. She will always be known as a woman tainted by the innuendo of illicit relations. Her child will always carry with him the stigma of his birth. We will never know Mary’s mind in all of this. Luke’s telling of the story wouldn’t be written for another hundred years after Mary first discovered her condition. We cannot know what her angel was like – what inner strength that helped her to stand up in a culture that was not friendly to women with questionable pregnancies and say “Let it be with me according to your word.” I’m convinced that there was a certain amount of courage and possibly early feminism that caused the writer of the Gospel of Matthew to include Mary and four other women tainted by scandal in Jesus’ genealogy. The five of them, Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, Bathsheba, and Mary all took responsibility for their physical and reproductive lives outside of convention.

There is something archetypal about this story – the unknown, the unheralded, the unlikely one called to something unexpected, possibly heroic. It is that part that lurks in all of us, unseen and unprepared to be coaxed out of our small lives and into a greater unknown. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we all stand in that place, confronted by an awesome presence – the presence of possibility that even now makes its way to a little village in the desert.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

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Madeline L'Engle, known to most of us as the author of the wonderful children's books *A Wrinkle in Time* and others was also a marvelous theological voice in the Episcopal Church. She was one of the artists in residence at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in NYC. She wrote a prayer that gets right to the heart of this brink on which we find ourselves.

Lord! Give me courage and love to open the door and constrain You to enter, whatever the disguise You come in, even before I fully recognize my guest!

Come in! Enter my small life!

Lay Your sacred hands on all the common

Things and small interests of that life and bless and change them. Transfigure my small resources, make them sacred.

And in them give me Your very Self. Amen.

What makes a life small and what makes a life grand? I believe that a grand life has set imagination free. A small life is constricted by barriers and those barriers can be social or cultural or they can be interior and emotional. I think the critical difference between a small life and a grand life is awareness. Who are you and why do you think the things that you think about yourself? Within every person is something dwelling in obscurity – some greatness yet undiscovered. It can be as simple as realizing that you are beloved of God and therefore acceptable. Boy does that change someone's experience if all they've ever been told is that they are unworthy. Such a message lacks imagination and keeps a life small. "Cleanse the thoughts of our heart by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit." That's not just some rote formula – it's a flat out invitation to God to come in and clear out all the baggage and negative memes that keep us from living abundantly and fearlessly and from stepping into who we really are.

I don't know if we have talked here about memes. It's a fairly recent understanding of how ideas spread. By way of definition, a meme is an idea, belief or belief system, or pattern of behavior that spreads throughout a culture either vertically by cultural inheritance (as by parents to children) or horizontally by cultural acquisition (as by peers, information media, and entertainment media). Memes account for a lot of what we think. We accept them blindly unless we are aware of them. Memes also account for a lot of prejudice and harmful thinking.

On this week in which we celebrate Mary, the lowly lifted up and made blessed and honored by God, I was shocked to see the news of the new study done by the CDC in Atlanta on the subject of violence against women. If you haven't seen it, it's a shocker. One in five women report some sort of sexual assault. As many as one in three report some sort of violence at the hands of some in their lives. There are memes at play here that keep this violence against women from being overcome by love, honor and blessedness. The violence itself can keep a woman's life and possibilities small – her meme may be that she is at fault or that no one will believe her, or that it's too shameful to admit. Then again, it could lead to more of the same.

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As much as women need to be liberated from such destructive attitudes and behaviors, the ones acting violently need it every bit as much. Mary's story – her courage and God's choice, plucking her from obscurity for all time, has purpose behind it. God does not intend for half of humanity to live in fear, controlled by violence and objectified. Mary is God's evidence of the completeness of God's love for all of humanity.

Please don't hear this as if I am expecting you to do something about this huge and disturbing issue. You have all done so much this year, this Advent, and I have been gladdened and humbled by your generosity and heart. But as we approach Bethlehem, being aware of all that this story means for our lives today is the start of transformation. If God didn't think that we could be called back from our warring, destructive ways, Christmas wouldn't have happened in the first place. We approach the greatest statement of hope for humankind from God's heart to ours. Our lives are being prepared for grandeur hidden in unlikely places, called from obscurity and into greatness.

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