

“Opening the Door to our Hearts”

Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-20

Part VI of VI in “Home for Christmas” Sermon Series

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 24, 2020 at 11 p.m., dedicated to all the men and women who have served this city as editors for Faith and Values in the Columbus Dispatch over the last 30 years, Dennis Mahoney, the late Felix Hoover, Kelly Lecker, Joanne Viviano, Meredith Heaney and Danae King, to all the frontline workers in the battle against the dreaded virus COVID-19 and always to the glory of God!

“Opening the Door to our Hearts”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth
and the meditations of each one of our hearts
be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our rock
and our salvation. Amen

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The one who gave birth to Jesus was the first true prophet of our Christian faith. As a teenage girl from the village of Nazareth, Mary received and proclaimed the coming of God to save the world. Long before John was baptizing and crying in the wilderness and long before her son, Jesus was prophesying deliverance to the Palestinian people, Mary sang out to Elizabeth, to the angels and all who were listening in the sixth month of her pregnancy about the awesome power of God. She sang:

*“God’s mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before God.
God shows strength, scatters the bluffing braggarts.
God knocks tyrants off their high horses, pulls victims out of the mud.
Brings the starving poor to the banquet;
and sends the callous rich were left out in the cold.”*

Travelling 90 miles on a donkey over mountainous terrain in the late stages of her pregnancy because the tyrants of her time demanded this to be so, Mary made it the city of David just in time to deliver salvation into the world. The circumstances of delivering salvation were challenging enough.

This was no ordinary birth. This was no ordinary Messiah. The Jews were suffering under the brutality of Roman occupation. They needed and expected a valiant warrior who would arrive on horseback and break the chains of oppression with a sweeping sword. What they got was a vulnerable baby, born in the straw of drafty stable.

Although she felt the power and presence of God, Mary must have had doubts that the Wonderful Counselor and Prince of Peace was really who she was holding in her arms. After all, she had birthed the Son of God in a stable and laid him in a feed trough which had been used by animals just before his birth. Nothing safe or sanitary about his coming.

Was his welcoming party supposed to be some scruffy, smelly shepherds who had just run in from the fields having left their flocks by night? That should have raised some red flags. Or what about the strange visitors from the East who brought really inappropriate

gifts for a baby. Didn't they know anything about babies and what mothers needed when the baby was born? Mary pondered all these things in her heart.

She must have trembled in fear and in pain as she gave birth this night so long ago – attended only by her new husband, in a cold stable in a strange town. Days later, she must have been gripped by terror and fear as she fled for her life, for her baby's life, to a stranger land called Egypt. A new mother. An exile. A wanted woman whose son had the price of death on his head. What kind of anguish must have seared her soul when she discovered that birth of her son caused the death of all the other newborn sons in the House of David?

This birth story is surrounded by death stories. There is trauma and terror associated with Jesus' birth as well as joy and delight. There were challenging days and nights she raised him in Egypt and Nazareth and watched him grow in wisdom and strength. When he stayed behind in the Temple to teach at 12 years old, she must have been frightened and terrified that he had been abducted or slain.

After all, his picture was up in the post office. He was a wanted boy.

At the wedding in Cana, a proud mother called on her son to turn water into wine and was rebuked in front of her family and neighbors as her reluctant son performed the miracle anyway. When he headed out of carpenter's workshops to teach and heal, to live out his Messianic calling, Mary must have known that his days were numbered. She was a poor Jewish woman, a victim of oppression by class, race and gender. You could not get much lower than a woman

in a patriarchal society, in first century Palestine, a Jew under Roman occupation and a peasant in a land of plenty.

But Mary was chosen by God to be the vessel of God's incarnation. God's promise had already become truth in her flesh. She was an undaunted prophet.

Mary wove her story into faith history. Her name translated from Miriam which meant - "rebellion." In the spirit of Miriam, Mary drew her strength from her ancient sister's powerful leadership of liberation and with her strength, Mary stood by Jesus to the end. She was faithful until his dying day, his dying moment. She never abandoned him – from cradle to cross. Although her soul was pierced to core, and at times, she did not understand him, she loved him with all the fervor of a mother's love. God had chosen well when God chose Mary to be the mother of our Savior. She was our prophet and she opened the door of our hearts.

As we kneel at the manger tonight, Mary is on my heart and my mind.

And with her, all of the mothers of all the millions of those who have died worldwide from COVID-19 are on my heart. All the mothers of the children in cages at our borders are on my heart. All the millions of mothers who are holding their babies who starving and in need of food and the chance to live are on my heart. All the mothers of refugees whose children lie at their feet or in their arms not able to speak the language of an often-hostile new land are on my heart. All the mothers of the all the babies who have been afflicted and affected by economic devastation this year and wonder what will

happen in the coming days, weeks, and months. All the mothers of children who struggle to learn in school and whose school is now the overcrowded kitchen table of an all-too-small home are on my heart. All of the mothers of over 150 women and men who have died in Columbus through homicides this year are on my heart tonight. Adrienne Hood and Tamala Payne, and all the grieving mothers of sons who have died through shootings by law enforcement officers here in Columbus are on my heart tonight.

Simply put, all the mothers of the world tonight are on my heart. As I think of Mary, from cradle to cross, I am thinking of the mothers who worry tonight about their children. I think of all the mothers who have birthed and then buried their sons and daughters – always and forever - too soon.

On this Christmas Eve, let us reflect on Mary, the first true prophet of our Christian faith, holding Jesus close to her heart.

As we come to God's Christmas table of grace, may we once again behold Jesus. And may we give thanks for Mary who opens the doors of our hearts. Amen.