

Mary, Breaker of Codes and Conventions

Matthew 1:18-25

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Advent 2

One of my favourite novels is *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd, set in South Carolina in 1964. In it a white teenager, Lily, struggling to make sense of her hazy memories from the afternoon her mother was killed, and living with a father who is abusive, runs away from home with her black "stand-in mother", Rosaleen, who has just insulted 3 powerful and racist men in town. Lily and Rosaleen head to a town whose name is written on the back of a card with a picture of a black Madonna. The card was in her mother's possessions, and she is convinced that place holds the secret to her mother's life and death. When Lily arrives in the town, she discovers 3 black beekeeping sisters, who welcome her and Rosaleen into their home. This is a story of self-discovery, forgiveness, love and belonging, as Lily heals in the company of these women. Lily is surrounded by love and acceptance in a way she has never been before, and in that safe space, is able to find peace and healing.

Central to Lily's healing is the Black Madonna, a statue of "a woman growing out of a block of wood, a black woman with her arm lifted out and her fist balled up." (p. 108) During the time of slavery, she had washed up on shore near Charleston, after the slaves had prayed that God would send them rescue, consolation and freedom. When she is found, they immediately see her as a symbol of their rescue, consolation and freedom, and one of the slaves, Pearl, declared her to be Mary the mother of Jesus. Kidd writes, "Everyone knew...that she'd seen suffering of every kind. That she was strong and constant and had a mother's heart. And here she was sent to them on the same waters that had brought them here in chains. It seemed to them she knew everything they suffered." (p. 109) The statue of Mary--the Black Madonna--is passed down from generation to generation, until she ends up in the living room of the house where Lily finds herself. The women of that house, who call themselves the Daughters of Mary, find renewed strength, hope and comfort in this statue of Mary, and Lily finds herself drawn to this figure of a woman who knew suffering and pain, who for generations had given strength and courage to others to work and strive for freedom, to live with a "raised fist in their hearts." (p. 109)

We are exploring various aspects of Mary during our Advent worship this year, and our scripture text this morning highlights how Mary's pregnancy impacted Joseph. Her pregnancy did not follow the expected, conventional and socially acceptable pattern of betrothal, then marriage, then pregnancy. The news of Mary's pregnancy sent Joseph on a journey of decision-making around what to do. His first inclination is to quietly divorce Mary. It would have been within his rights to have her stoned for sleeping with another man, but he cares for her enough to spare her that. Mary's decision to say 'yes' to God, to agree to participate in this thing that God was doing through her, had a big impact, not only on her, but on those closest to her. In saying 'yes' to God, she broke the rules around what was acceptable and what was not.

We haven't typically thought of Mary as a rule breaker. She is most often described and depicted as mild mannered, quiet, serene; she is the glowing mother of the nativity scene, halo around her head as she gazes upon her child with wonder and love. There is no sign of the blood and sweat that went into actually delivering this baby; no sign of the tears and cries of pain as she laboured to birth this child--son of God, yes, but born of flesh and sweat and blood by Mary.

We acknowledge that Mary was a pregnant teenager and try to get a realistic picture of what it must have been like for her. But rarely do we place her in the category of rule breaker, or breaker of conventional codes. Partly I wonder if this is because we equate rule breaking with rebellion, and our scripture texts certainly don't give us the picture of a rebellious Mary, although if we really read the magnificat, we see the definite political themes running through it of overturning the powerful and lifting up the lowly. Her song of praise is revolutionary in tone, but we still don't really think of Mary as rebellious. And nor am I suggesting that we should see her as rebellious. Rather, I think we may want to examine what it means to be a rule breaker, or a breaker of conventional code in light of the scripture stories of Mary. Our scripture texts tell of someone who responded to an invitation from God with 'yes'. Saying 'yes' put her outside of expected patterns and acceptable conventions.

As I read the scripture text, I'm drawn to the genealogy that precedes it. In that genealogy, there are 4 women included, something which is highly unusual. And

not only are 4 women included, but the women who are included, are all women with unusual or unorthodox birth stories or sexual histories. First, there's Tamar, who seduces her father-in-law, Judah, in order to hold him accountable to fulfill his obligations in terms of giving his third son to her in marriage so that there would be offspring in her dead husband's name....and therefore a livelihood for her (Genesis 38); then, there's Rahab, a prostitute in Jericho, who hid the spies sent by Joshua and helped them to escape; then Ruth, who married Boaz under unusual circumstances; and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, whom David seduced and impregnated. Each of these women in her own way broke with conventional code, or was the victim of someone else's breaking of the code. This is the lineage of Jesus, through Joseph's family tree. He comes from a line of unconventional women; his own birth does not fit conventional patterns. As we examine these women, we don't see rebellion in their unconventional lives, so much as women who stood up for justice, or who struggled to make a life for herself in a society that made this very difficult for women. The unconventional decisions they made were their way of saying 'no' to the cultural expectations that would take away their livelihood and their dignity. It was their raised fist to the injustice or challenge that confronted them.

As I have pondered Mary as the breaker of codes, I have thought of other women who, too, broke the codes or conventions of their time: Esther, who risked her life by asking for an audience with the king, in order to save her people; Rosa Parks, who said 'no' to racial inequality and injustice; Malala Youzafzai, who has said 'no' to the powers of government and 'yes' to the education of girls and women, at risk to her own life. I've also thought of the countless women and men, young and old, black and white who are standing up for justice, who are saying 'no' to the killing of young black men at the hands of white police officers.

Maybe the raised fist is too defiant, too angry for us. Maybe instead of a fist, it's an open hand raised as a gesture that says 'stop'. Or maybe it's the 3-finger farewell raised by fictional character Katniss Everdeen, in *The Hunger Games*, as her way of honouring and saying good-bye to her fallen competitor; her way of showing those in power that people are more than game pieces, (p.237) a gesture that inspired others to also raise their hands in protest against an evil system that turned the killing of children into entertainment.

The raised fist or hand is not so much about rebellion and defiance, as it is about saying 'no' to injustice, to oppression, to death, and saying 'yes' to freedom and safety, dignity and justice. The face of Mary for us today is not so much the serene, placid face of a mother looking on her child, as it is the face of someone saying 'no' to injustice and 'yes' to freedom and peace.

This idea is captured by Jan Richardson, in her Advent devotional book, *Night Visions*, in a reflection entitled "An angel named Thelma". This is the name she has given to an angel who hangs in her home. Richardson writes, "An angel named Thelma is not your average angel. She most definitely is not among the current rage of angels depicted as ephemeral, fragile, benign beings who look like they wouldn't hurt a flea. She hangs out with the sorts of angels we find in the Bible. Hardly benign, these angels were messengers of harsh news and bearers of surprising invitations. They might come with comfort, but they always come with a cost. An angel named Thelma is what I need in this season: an uppity angel at my shoulder. Someone who can breathe fire. Who will remind me that being nice won't sustain me through the labour. Who will cry out with me in the birth pangs. Who will dispatch the dragon who waits to devour what is struggling to be born." (p. 80)

We know that Mary received the invitation to say 'yes' from the angel Gabriel, but I like to think she was able to say 'yes' because she had an angel named Thelma giving her the courage to say 'yes', assuring her that she would not be alone, that she would be given the strength she needed to walk this unconventional path.

Saying 'yes' in this way isn't so much about being against something, or being defiant, as it is about paying attention to how God is calling us--calling us to say 'yes' and say 'no'; calling us into deeper relationship with God; into deeper relationship with our world and with others. It is about paying attention to our desires for love, for justice, for freedom that lie deep within each of us, and saying 'yes' to those desires as they draw us closer to God. (Richardson, p. 21) Advent, this time of waiting, is a time when we can pay attention to our desires and our longings, which are at the root of all our yeses and our nos. Particularly during this Advent season, Mary invites us to pay attention to our longing for justice in a world deeply divided--the news is full stories of the racial hatred and divide that exists in our communities; our church news is full of stories of theological divides that exist in our congregations, our conferences and our denomination.

This Advent, we can pay attention to the desires within us, and ask ourselves if our desires will bring healing to others as well as ourselves. Will they bring us closer to God? (p. 21) Will our saying 'yes' to these desires help to create the world that Mary envisioned as she said 'yes' to God? Christine Valters Paintner says that "Mary invites us to say yes in a thousand ways every day, to open ourselves to the possibility of love breaking through, to slow ourselves down enough to receive the gifts as they arrive to us unbidden." ([www.abbeyof the arts.com](http://www.abbeyofthearts.com))

I think the other part of the unconventionality of Mary's 'yes' is that it gave her a chance to re-define herself. In a patriarchal culture, where women were the property first of their fathers and then of their husbands, God's invitation to Mary was an invitation to be part of something that went beyond the bounds of culture and patriarchy. She was given the chance to have a say in her future, to have a say in what her life would be like. In saying 'yes' to God, she was letting God define her, and give her a new identity, rather than taking her identity from her father or her husband. Rather than letting others tell her who she was, she let God identify her and call her to become the person God wanted her to be.

Kathleen Norris calls this claiming of one's identity virginity. She says that virginity has less to do with sexuality and more to do with recognizing ourselves as loved by God at our very core; as valuable, unique and undiminished at the very centre of our being. To be virgin is to recognize the part of ourselves that no other human can touch, the part of ourselves that belongs just to us and to God. (*Amazing Grace*, p. 75) In a culture where a woman was nothing without a man, this invitation to Mary was radical and unconventional; it broke all the rules.

Who is the person God is calling you to become? How does our culture want to define you and what identity does God want to give you instead? What is the invitation for you in this Advent season?

The God who called Mary is a God who breaks the rules; who will not be bound by the conventional codes when those codes do not lead to freedom, dignity and justice. This rule-breaking God loves us and longs for us. We, like Mary, can claim the identity and future that God has for us. May we have the courage to say 'yes'.