

The Light Shapes

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Dec. 20, 2015

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Then Mary said "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." (Luke 1: 46-47)

Mary was only 14. Barely a woman, and in many ways, still a child. Born into a lowly life with little or no power over her future, and oppressive cultural norms that defined her every move. Her future depended upon an arranged marriage to an older man named Joseph. A man whose attitude toward her as his wife could provide shelter to live safely beyond the confines of her parent's home, or just as easily become a life of endurance and survival. To move from girlhood to womanhood was filled with uncertainty in those days. Mary had not yet tasted life as an adult, yet suddenly the truth the angel Gabriel delivered threw her into an unimaginable reality. While still in childhood innocence, she was called to give her self over to the power of the Holy Spirit and embrace adult responsibilities of motherhood. Her mind could hardly anticipate or imagine what lay ahead, but her heart was not afraid. From that moment on...nothing would be the same. Her life would become a magnification of the Power of God's love and light unleashed to change the world.

Elizabeth, her cousin, was much older, but no less constricted by her fate as a Hebrew woman of ancient Israel. Elizabeth knew she was among the lucky women of her day, for she was married to a priest in the temple. Yet although her marriage was safe and honorable, she had lost hope and her dream of being a mother, and in her barrenness, her worth within her culture was diminishing. But then, God gave her the impossible, a child with a destiny neither she nor her husband could have ever imagined. From that moment on...nothing would be the same. Her life became a magnification of the Power of God's love and light unleashed to change the world.

Two women...each shaped by their culture for humble expectations; dependent upon male protection; and with little reason to understand and even recognize the stirring of the eternal holiness of God, much less the power of hope. Yet each became a vessel, within human history through which the light of Christ was born to transform a weary, sin-sick world.

Their familiar story comes to us just days before Christmas, and we might wonder if their story applies in our modern, complicated, overwhelming world. Is God's light still magnified within real, ordinary people today? Can new life and hope break into the many stories of oppression and despair that paralyze hope all around us? Is there a way in which we too might be called for magnification of God's light and saving love in this time of history?

As I pondered the presence of modern day stories of people whose lives God has used to magnify his power and bring praise and joy to our weary world, I thought of a young woman, a bit like Mary, and an older woman, not too different than Elizabeth.

The first is the story of Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani teenager shot in the head about 3 years ago by the Taliban for daring to promote girls' education. I remember that news story well, as I am sure you do too. For parents and children everywhere were aghast that such cruel hate and a demand for absolute control would unabashedly try to assassinate a child! Yet evil didn't have the final word. Malala survived, and lived to give birth to a new power of hope. Speaking

to the United Nations, Malala was given a standing ovation as she declared the attempt on her life had only given her strength and banished any fear she once felt. In her first public appearance, she said, *"Dear friends, on the 9th of October, 2012, the Taliban shot me on the left side of my forehead. They shot my friends too. They thought that the bullets would silence us, but they failed."* From that moment on...nothing would be the same. Her life became a magnification of the Power of God's love and light unleashed to change the world.

On her 16th birthday, she said, *"The terrorists thought that they would change my aims and stop my ambitions, but nothing changed in my life except this -- weakness, fear and hopelessness died, strength, power and courage was born. I am the same Malala, my ambitions are the same, my hopes are the same and my dreams are the same,"* she said to thunderous applause. Later, introducing Malala to a Youth Assembly of nearly 1,000 students from around the world, former U.K. Prime Minister Gordon Brown had said that it was a "miracle" that she was able to be there. She was welcomed to the stage as her mother, father and other family members watched and the audience stood to applaud. That day was declared Malala Day by the U.N. However, Malala said it was *"not my day," but a day for every woman, boy and girl struggling for their rights. "Thousands of people have been killed by the terrorists and millions have been injured,"* she said. *"I am just one of them. So here I stand, one girl among many."* *"I speak not for myself but for those without voice ... those who have fought for their rights -- their right to live in peace, their right to be treated with dignity, their right to equality of opportunity, their right to be educated."* Her message to world leaders was that they should introduce "free, compulsory education" for all children across the globe. From that moment on...nothing would be the same. Her life has become a magnification of the Power of God's love and light unleashed to change the world.

The second story is about a Twin Cities woman many of us may have met or know about. I met her when I joined students and adults helping to serve meals to the poor while a pastor at Shepherd of the Hills a few years ago.

The people on the streets of Minneapolis call her their "street mother." City officials call her "an extraordinary leader" and an "urban saint." But Mary Jo Copeland, the founder and director of Sharing and Caring Hands, doesn't ask for praise. She knows from experience what it is to live in poverty and brokenness and she is striving to make the world a better place for the poor each and every day. Copeland's startup of Sharing and Caring is all the more remarkable given her painful past.

Mary Jo Copeland barely graduated from high school and never attended college. Yet, in the past 30 years, she has raised millions of dollars to assist thousands who needed a caring hand -- without government or United Way funds. Mary Jo was born in 1942, shortly before her father left for the war. She and her mother moved in with his parents, but they considered her mother a second-class, unworthy farm girl, and were disparaging and controlling, often limiting Mary Jo's bond with her mother.

Her father returned from the war with an injury and an explosive temper. They moved to a new home, where Mary Jo watched her father beat her mother daily. Her father's frequent verbal tirades and occasional physical assaults still haunt her today.

With the arrival of a baby boy, Mary Jo's weary mother became neglectful. Mary Jo often wore dirty clothes and bathed in a filthy bathtub. Terrified of her father, Mary Jo found solace in church and prayer. She yearned to do the will of God and planned to become a nun.

However, at age 15, she met and fell for Dick Copeland at a high school dance. Despite family objections, they married after high school and had 12 children in quick succession.

Estranged from both sets of grandparents, Mary Jo ran her own household on a schedule that

began at 5 a.m. and ended after dark. Though the children had chores, her time was consumed by providing the clean home and clothes and good meals she missed in her own childhood. Yet, her self-esteem was almost nonexistent, like that of many other people she helps today.

Mary Jo's early years instilled the empathy that makes her work so extraordinary. She understands the indignity of filth; the challenge of addiction; and the terror of abuse. In an interview about her journey, Mary Jo said, *"Getting out of your own pain and into someone else's doesn't take it away but it gives you peace. Instead of concentrating on the pain and hard times and suffering in your own life, you are concentrating on someone else to help them."* God called her to this work, she said. *"Had I not listened I probably would have been a very depressed woman." Just as helping kindred spirits has been salve for her still-raw wounds, mentoring a child or helping out at a nursing home would help others out of their depression,"* she says. Doing the will of God has become Mary Jo's only goal. She now dedicates her life to making a difference in bringing hope to people's lives and letting them know, they're not walking alone and God will always be with them.

"I live with a lot of suffering, a lot of memories...but never once do I get up and not run to be grateful that I can make a difference in the life of someone else, that I can feel what they feel. It's a gift from God," she says. "It's a privilege that is mine." (quotes from a 9/5/2013 article in the Pioneer Press on TwinCities.com written by Caryn Sullivan of Eagan)

Mary and Elizabeth...Malala and Mary Jo – all four of these women were born and raised with little or no power. And all were as open as they were vulnerable. And each was shaped in hope to become a vessel through which the impregnable, unstoppable, light of God is born to bring possibility into impossibility. The light and power of hope is born into darkness, but darkness cannot overcome it. For, the light of Christ magnifies and shapes his children in heavenly light.

Each one of us has our own story of how the light of Christ breaks into our vulnerable places of longing and hurt. Our stories maybe not as dramatic or posted in world or local news, but each human story is a place of birth where hope is born...again, and again...and again. It cannot be stopped. When the light breaks in, it shapes us for newness and nothing can be the same again. How will our lives be a magnification of the Power of God's love and light unleashed to change the world? We don't know...we don't need to. All that is needed is a heart that trusts the one that comes. And when we do, the birth of hope is all around us, and the light shapes. Amen.