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Homily for the Feast of the Assumption at LCWR Assembly in Nashville, TN
August 15, 2014

It's challenging to understand the physics of the Feast of the Assumption, but it's energizing to hear the singing of the Magnificat by the one whose feast day we celebrate today. Allow me to reprise Carol Zinn's question as this assembly began: "Are we singing with full voice, the ways in which God's creation, and Christ's body, cry out for justice, inclusivity, and compassion?" Our Gospel today is a perfect bookend to Carol's question about singing with full voice.

Actually, St. Luke deserves a Tony Award, for the first two chapters of his Gospel are like the opening of a Broadway musical. Everyone is singing – old Zechariah singing tenor, young Mary singing her Magnificat in a beautiful soprano, pre-natal babies are dancing an Hasidic Macarena in their mother's wombs, angels are regaling everyone from on high, and then comes the deep baritone voice of Simeon followed by the prophetess Anna with her contralto voice ... wow! St. Luke has it all over Andrew Lloyd Weber!

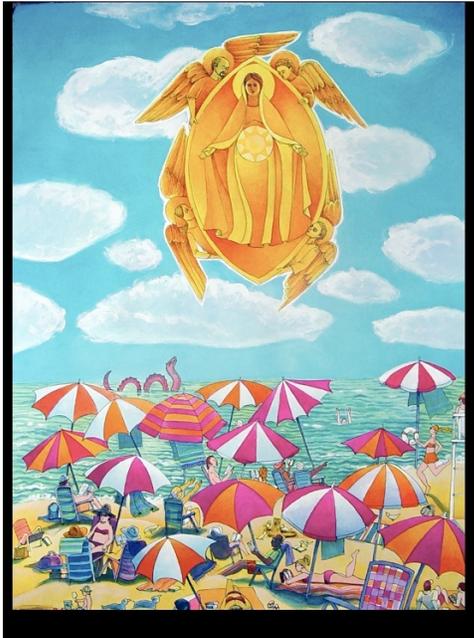
But, even with all this action, the Gospel does not help us with the mechanics of the Assumption! So, my all-time favorite explanation of this feast comes from a typical teacher-student exchange. The teacher asks, "Who can tell me what the feast of the Assumption is all about?" A little girl offers her response, "It means that Mary was so holy we just assume she went to heaven."

It's the thinking of this little girl about Mary being so holy that is deeply resonant with the Scriptures we hear proclaimed for this feast. Her holiness is steeped in the fact that as a first-century Galilean woman she simply recognizes that God is doing great things in and through her—isn't this what all disciples are called to? Or for us as 21st century North American women and men religious, Pope Francis asks us to let our hearts dwell on a freeze-frame of the joy of 'the moment when Jesus looked at me.' Here all our souls proclaim the greatness of God. But, to use another image of Pope Francis', "too often our lives seem like Lent without Easter." And, since this is a gathering for us in leadership, do I need to remind you of the vast amount of time we spend on our sisters and brothers in community whose lives look like Lent without Easter.

Mary certainly stands with anyone and everyone—past, present, or future—who recognizes and honors that God works wonders in and through individuals who allow their own ordinariness to be the stuff of radical holiness. Mary's song is not meant for the faint of heart – there is nothing nostalgic or sentimental about it! It is about divine reversal. And here in Opryland, speaking of reversal, it's NOT the answer to the question, "What do you get when you play a country music song backwards?" *U get ur house back, u get ur dog back, u get ur 1st and 2nd wives back, u get ur front porch swing, u get ur pretty little thing, u get ur bling bling bling and a diamond ring!*

No, the reversal in Mary's song is the scattering of the proud, the casting of the mighty from their thrones, the lifting up of the lowly, the filling of hungry hearts and bellies with good things, and the sending of the rich away empty – truly this reversal is about the power of God and the powerless of humankind, no matter how insignificant one is in the eyes of the world, there is, in God's vast purview, dignity for all.

Assumption over Bethany Beach

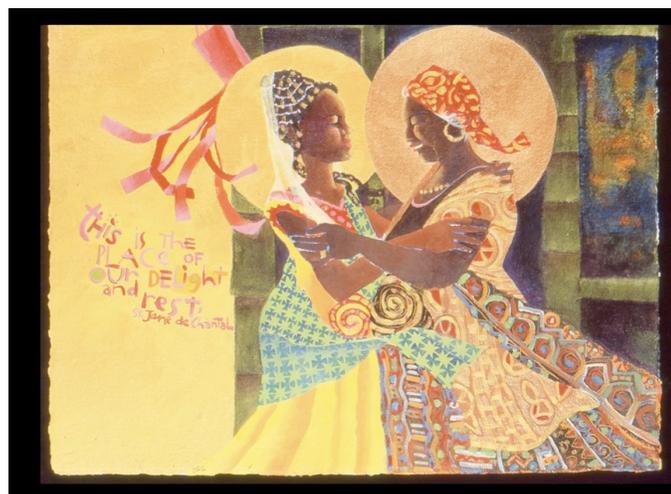


Also, on this feast it seems we are given a glimpse of heaven. In the Book of Revelation, there is a woman described as clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet. What I especially love is the next image of the red dragon ready to devour the child. “These enigmatic and apocalyptic symbols and dizzying details,” says author Brother Mickey, “seem to have stepped right out of a Spielberg film.”

The painter, Mickey McGrath, a brother Oblate of St. Francis de Sales and good friend, shows us Mary hovering over our heads. He describes the scene well: “Some on the beach are simply soaking up the sun, sipping lemonade and wondering where to have dinner that evening, while one, the painter of this image, is nearly drowning. Life is like that, isn't it? Birth, death, and the ordinary stuff in between happen at the same time, packing every moment of our day with mystery. We are continually given glimpses not only of God, and all that is good, beautiful, but of the serpent as well, who lies in wait to devour the baby of the woman so holy we just assume she is in heaven—watching over us all like a lifeguard.” This feast day encourages us to literally grab the problems we face each day, to wrestle with the wild things of our imaginings, by the handle of hope.

The Visitation

There have been many studies conducted on the effects of fear and anxiety on the baby in its mother's womb. Just imagine some of the worries that Mary had to face for herself—and even the concerns she had for her elder cousin who was pregnant! Yet, even after her arduous trek to visit Elizabeth, Mary and she realized that their pre-natal babies were leaping for joy in their wombs! And, we see the full blossoming of



hope announced by Elizabeth as she delighted in the fact that Mary was blessed because she believed that the promises of the Lord would be fulfilled.

Mary's willingness to believe that the promises of the Lord would be fulfilled is a posture she assumes for the rest of her life and one that we religious need to assume as we discover holy mystery revealed in our midst. Writing about Mary in his book *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, James Martin reminds the reader that "Mary was told that her son would be the Son of God, not that he would be tortured, put to death on a cross, and then rise from the dead. Mary says yes to a future that she does not know. She is an example of letting God do God's work, without trying to figure it out." Sometimes I wonder whether we spend too much time trying to figure religious life out instead of trusting that God will work it out. Or, especially for us in leadership, to always remember that life is not simply a problem to be solved but a mystery to be revered!

Thus, discovering, as did Mary, that God is as real as the problems we face each day, we come to know and love God whose "mercy is from age to age" and who continues to "lift up the lowly."

Mary, Queen of Peace



And, in conclusion, as we pray here together, we are aware of so many problems in our world and so many ways that each one of us can be a transforming agent to shape that future we do not know, all the while doing what we can in the zip code where live, to usher in God's reign.

In this painting, we are riveted on just one place that beckons our prayerful intercession due to the profound unrest between Israel and Palestine. In this image we see the western wall in Jerusalem. Mary, mentioned more times in the *Koran* than in the New Testament, is portrayed here in a Jewish prayer shawl and the traditional Palestinian *kofia*. There is a break in the western wall that shows the clear blue sky, the dawning of a new day, as the Holy Spirit holds out the olive branch.

Today and this weekend, all over the US, we will offer prayers of hope and solidarity for the atrocities perpetrated against Christians, Yezidis and others in Iraq and other parts of the Middle East, as we heard from the Dominican sister whose email was read at morning prayer. It is almost incomprehensible that today, in organized military action, Muslim extremists are torturing and killing innocent unarmed women and children, attempting forced conversions to Islam and inflicting every type of inhumanity on fellow human beings, including crucifixion.

To conclude ... Mary sang it so well: "The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name." And, as that little girl said so unassumingly, this feast is all about assuming Mary went to heaven because she was so holy. May we be that holy. May our striving to be holy, by recognizing and celebrating that God still does great things in and through us, transform the world.

As Nancy Schreck suggested, when folks back home ask what we did here – "We walked around the mystery looking for God's revelation."

And, since this feast is ultimately about OUR full communion with our sisters and brothers in our final destiny, may we religious keep singing with full voice, the canticle of God's creation, as Christ's body, crying out for justice, inclusivity, and compassion until that day comes!