Jesus in a box

Come, abide within me; let my soul, like Mary, be your earthly sanctuary
(The Hymnal 1982 #475, v. 3)

From the place at home where I have my prayer time, I can look directly at a painting of
the Annunciation. Well, maybe it's not an actual painting. But it's in a frame…

I have no idea who the artist is - but it’s a typically sentimental depiction. I happened
upon it at a garage sale, if you can imagine. Who, I thought, wouldn’t want this?! And it was
priced at a dollar, so just within a deacon’s modest budget.

It's one of my absolute favorite things. Ever.

Partly because I’m able to see the humor - and the seriousness - of the Annunciation
being a bargain. And at the same time, not.

Partly because Gabriel is beautiful, and Mary is posed in serene obedience. That’s how
I’d like to picture myself if the Angel Gabriel ever showed up: head bowed, one hand keeping
the place in my book, the other resting quietly on my breast.

And isn’t that one of the first things that pops into our heads when we hear the
Magnificat?

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord

Except that this song - our Gospel passage this morning - comes later in the story.

It's hot and dry in the small town where Mary lives. She finds herself pregnant and
afraid. Afraid to tell her parents, and afraid because of the stigma she faces as a potentially
unwed mother. So to avoid scandal, she goes to an even more remote place up in the hill country
to seek refuge with her cousin Elizabeth. A safe place with a safe person, away from prying eyes
and gossiping tongues.

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled
with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:42).

And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour' (Luke
1:46-47)

Mary had clearly been worried about her fate, or she would not have sung this song. A
song that echoes the Song of Hannah in the early part of the book of Samuel.
But even finding her in this condition, we still want to be like Mary.

Why?

Surely not because she was deeply troubled, a condition that would follow her much of her life, as Simeon foretold: and a sword will pierce your own soul too. (Luke 2:35b)

No, that can’t be why we want to be like Mary.

The Magnificat suggests that it’s because of her faith. Faith that God is a God of justice; a God who is ready, willing, and able to balance the scales of what is often a life of unfairness.

Mary’s song endures because every time we go out the church doors and back into the world, we see that unfairness all around us. That’s why we keep praying Your kingdom come, your will be done. But the part of that equation that we often need help remembering is that God’s will doesn’t get done all by itself. God’s will is that, as stewards of Creation, we play an active role in the story.

Have you ever noticed that there’s rarely a clock in church?

Have you ever wondered why?

Ostensibly, it's because church is supposed to be a reflection of heaven - a place of eternity where there is no time, because it doesn’t matter there.

But I’m going to take you back in time anyway. Just a little bit.

Who remembers two weeks ago? The Gospel that morning was the double-story of the feeding of the five thousand, followed by Jesus walking on the sea. I would imagine that many people wondered why we had both stories on the same morning, when each is sufficient to preach on and explore. And I would imagine that not many preachers talked about both in the same homily. But if you look closely, the same important thing happens in each of them.

And then it happens again last Sunday at the Transfiguration.

The exact same thing.

People try to contain Jesus.

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. (John 6:15)

Then they wanted to take him into the boat (John 6:21a)
Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. (Luke 9:33)

It’s part of who we are. We want to be able to keep things so we can look at them later - like knick-knacks on a shelf or animals at the zoo. We want to put labels on things so we can define them, thinking that if we can define them, we might just be able to understand them.

So we call Jesus peace; the inaccessible light where God dwells; our sanctification and redemption; the great high priest; the brightness of glory; the creator of the ages; our spiritual food and drink; the rock and the water; the foundation of faith; the chief cornerstone; the mediator between God and humans; the beginning of all things; the King whose kingdom is boundless.

We call Jesus all those things because he is all those things. But he is also more. And we can seek to define him and put him in a container till the cows come home, but he is not having it. He’ll withdraw to the mountain by himself. He’ll send our boat on over to the other shore. He’ll do whatever he has to do and keep on doing it until we get the message.

And that is really why we want to be like Mary. Because she never tried to put Jesus in a box. Rather, she was the container for him. She carried him within her, and then she gave him to the world. No easy feat, especially when we look closely at her story.

But... we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Ephesians 2:10)

We want to be like Mary so that we too will carry Jesus within us and then give him to the world...

...then righteousness and praise will spring up before all the nations.