

## **Reviving Mary's Revolutionary Indigenous Vision in Native America**

**By Anthony Trujillo**

Good morning, and Good Third Sunday of Advent to you.

First of all, I want to thank Rev. Barnett and all of you for the invitation to be with you today.

I don't know how awake you all were when you arrived, but the reading from Isaiah shakes our eyes open with riveting imagery:

We see a drought-stricken desert bursting into bloom with the advent of long awaited rains. We can almost feel the built-up tension in the hard-crusting earth, at last relaxing, and the people together with the land breathing a sigh of relief. It is a massive exhalation, that sonically rings out in the form of ecstatic singing, and visually breaks out in an eruption of flowers.

But to appreciate the euphoria, we have to consider the immense tension that leads up to this passage. This vision of vitality comes at the climax of God's powerful intervention into an existential political and spiritual crisis in Ancient Israel. The Assyrians, an aggressive Imperial power bent on dominating the Near East, were poised to overtake Jerusalem. They had ransacked the ten northern tribes of Israel carrying away a swath of Israel's population, rupturing its territorial integrity and calling into question the blessing given Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jerusalem was spared the direct assault, but Israel as a nation, was deeply wounded with the earth, not only as a witness, but as a participant.

Can we feel the tension of the earth being stretched to its habitable extremes? Can we see the arid landscape whose last douse of moisture was not rain, but blood?

Holding this tension in mind, we jump centuries into the future and hear echoes of a similar crisis in the song that is attributed to a young Indigenous Jewish woman in Roman-occupied Palestine. A woman who carried an illicitly-conceived child.

The unmarried young woman's bulging belly posed a threat to the moral and religious codes of her era. Her body also posed a threat to the governing structures of her day. As the story goes, the child she had chosen to nurture inside her was the God-appointed leader who would be the antithesis of the Rome-endorsed proxy governor in Jerusalem, King Herod. Because of her choice, Mary faced the very real prospect of horrific violence tearing through her body and ending her life as well as that of her child.

And yet, this defiant young Mary sings: "[God] has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts; he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly."

These are fighting words. Filled with the spirit, Mary summons not simply joy, but revolution. (Whoever said that we should keep politics outside of the church, hasn't read the bible). It is no less apparent to her, than it is to us that the wealthy and the powerful of any political persuasion will play any side of any isle – and will commandeer whole nations and religions – to extract more from the body of the earth, more from the bodies of humans, more from the bodies of all God's creatures to protect and increase their gains – and to make sure the landless, the powerless, the poor and the vulnerable are kept in their places.

Mary knows that she has zero standing under the law, so instead of asking for a legislative fix she summons her prophetic voice to call for the overturning of a system that puts entire populations into states of precarity. And she calls upon the earth-emergent, sustenance-filled promises made to her Indigenous ancestors by her Indigenous God. Promises that preceded the arrival of the empires of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome: "He has filled the hungry with good things, and has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy according to the promise made to our ancestors."

As Mary's revolutionary words echo through history, her voice and her body become the epicenter of a sonic tidal wave that travels across the ocean and smashes, this morning, into the shores of North America – thanks to our alterNative lectionary reading.

On this wave surges the question: whose stories resonate with the existential crises and revolutionary visions of Isaiah and Mary in this continent? Whose lives and livelihoods have been devastated by the onslaught of colonial violence?

Whose bodies have been rendered illicit by our legal and religious codes? Which women summon the hopes, promises and power of their ancestors to imagine a flourishing life for their children and their communities?

Cara Romero, an Indigenous photographer from the Chemehuevi tribe in California, presents us with the image of a young Cherokee woman. The young woman emerges powerfully into our field of vision as though suspended between light and darkness. Her straight-on gaze stops us in our tracks and we come face-to-face, eye-to-eye with a person whose presence poses questions that shift our world on its axis. If there is to be a story of sacred women to be told in this place, this icon asserts that the Indigenous young woman in the gospel must be refigured as *a woman Indigenous to this land* and set within an ecology of inter-species relations here.

Though the Cherokee woman appears in a deep time context, she also confronts us, and by extension our history. “How have you come here?” She asks – you, you, you, me? She knows how, in the 1830s, the United States army marched her Cherokee ancestors from what is now Georgia to a reservation in what is now Oklahoma in the middle of winter with hundreds perishing along the way. She knows the extraordinary lengths Americans will go to take her land, steal the promises made to her people, and deprive her of life and her children of a future.

Her presence calls to mind the violent colonial histories of this place. The massacre and enslavement of Pequot women, children and elders in the 1630s and the ongoing attempts to erase Indigenous people from the political and spiritual landscape of “New England”; it was not long ago that the Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation, the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation and the Golden Hill Paugussett Tribe were denied federal recognition, depriving them of vital resources to support their communities. Though there are many Native people who tenaciously continue to fight for their existence all around us, the State of Connecticut all but wipes them out of history. Cara Romero’s Indigenous icon is a powerful reminder of Indigenous presence where many would prefer to see only their absence. The young Cherokee woman haunts American Christians with the uncomfortable truth that the church is one of the primary beneficiaries of the terrible violence that undergirds the American Dream.

This Advent, as we listen to the songs of Indigenous resistance, defiance and celebration emanating from biblical figures who were viscerally threatened with imperial power and colonial desire, our texts ask us to sit with these deeply uncomfortable tensions and ask: What does it mean for us to stop depicting images of Mary in ways that extract all of her glory but accept none of her Indigenous fury. What does it look like for us to stop putting Mary's radical imaginary onto a first century reservation, but instead to allow her vision to surge into the middle of our communities, here like a tide pushing up the Connecticut River, unseating the powerful and affluent and uplifting those whose lives have been pushed into extreme precarity?

If Illuminative icon challenges us, it also offers us a vision of a different kind of orientation to the world. The Cherokee woman's body is a mountain over which an Indigenous womanhood – and politics – arises. Her authoritative shoulders appear as the towering peak rising out of an unseen world into which the lower part of her body is rooted. It is clear that our mustard seed faith is no match for her immensity. She causes us to question, not whether it might be possible to move a mountain, but why anyone would want to. The hubris and violence of even contemplating such an act feels less like faith and more like apostasy. Do we have the faith to not only to leave to leave this mountain alone, but to let the mountain of Indigenous women's political and prophetic power reshape relations, politics and religion, here?

Are we ready to receive Mary's song in all of its raw, revolutionary power?

A violence-drenched, justice-parched earth in existential crisis awaits our response.