

Reflection for December 20, 2020
The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Mary's Song of Praise (*Luke 1*)

46 And Mary^{fi} said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

At Christmas time people are in the mood for miracles. I feel like this particular Christmas, we are really waiting for a miracle, like the whole world is holding its breath waiting. Today's scripture reading from Luke has all the needed ingredients -the appearance of angels, a virgin learns that she will bear a child, and another woman, who is well past

childbearing years is also pregnant. Beyond their exquisite mystery, these marvelous prospective births offer multiple meaning, and the promise of new life ready to break into a waiting world.

Our story comes in two parts. The first is the annunciation to Mary. The second part is Mary's visit to Elizabeth.

It starts with Mary. We do not really know much about her or her family. She is young, from a small town, engaged to a man named Joseph. Over the years Mary has been depicted as the model of a Christian believer. She has the reputation of being in perfect sync with God, responding to God's command in absolute obedience. She is the "favoured one", "Blessed", but the thing I find so extraordinary about Mary is her ordinariness. She reminds us that all of us, regular, broken, ordinary saints are integrally included in the work of God. In these few verses Mary is described as favoured, perplexed, thoughtful, and afraid. She questions, believes, and accepts her vocation.

To a girl named Mary an *angel* came.¹

Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you. This assurance of the present-ness of God sets the tone for the message that is to come. Mary does not know her life is about to be both upended and established forever in the history of humankind. She does not know that her humble beginnings are not indicative of her calling as the mother of the Messiah. She does not know that the favor upon her will not translate to personal gain, or popularity, or privilege. We have the advantage of knowing what is next, but Mary does not know why an angel would disrupt the normal course of her life with the simple words, "Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you." It is no wonder that she was "perplexed and pondered" (1:29). Mary's life circumstances would reasonably cause her to question—*Am I favored? Is God with me? What will this favor entail?*

The angel Gabriel reminds Mary that nothing is impossible with God.

Mary's obedience is neither optional nor forced. She acts freely when she offers herself as a servant of God – to embrace her identity as the Mother of God. It is her calling. As the story unfolds, Mary acts as a creative agent with God in the coming of the Christ child. It is an invitation to us, to think about who we are and what we do in relation to God and God's work.

I love this story because of what the incarnation tells us about the character of God. God's messenger, Gabriel, arrives at a particular time (the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy), in a particular place (Nazareth), to a particular woman (Mary). God shows up in history, God acts in our world and invites us individuals to take part in the miraculous things that God is doing.

This is divine vulnerability, entering our reality through the womb of Mary, "God-bearer". God-with-us, barges in and meddles with our affairs, calling us and transforming us.

After being greeted by an angel and told that she is favoured by the Lord and to be the mother of Jesus, the son of the Most High, she has the courage to say ask "How is this be?" Gabriel replies saying that nothing is impossible with God and offers Elizabeth's pregnancy as an example. She has been called -and Mary says, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord." Like prophets before her.

In Godly Play, with the kids, we talk about prophets being people who come so close to God and God comes so close to them, that they know what God wants them to say and do. Mary's "Here I Am" is her acceptance of her part in God's transforming action.

The angel departs.

Mary hastens to be with Elizabeth. To share with her. I imagine that she needs the company of another woman, someone older. We can sense the excitement in the meeting. I can picture them embracing, hugging each other. Two women with unexcepted but wanted pregnancies anticipating a new future.

At the sound of Mary's voice, Elizabeth's babe moves in her womb. Feeling new life moving, good news – possibilities. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, and it is her sense of divine presence that prompts her to exclaim, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry." Elizabeth is offering a prophetic word here, acknowledging how God is working in the world. We can put ourselves in Elizabeth's place And yet she celebrates with joy!

I love this story, especially the relationship between these two brave women. We see them supporting each other during an exciting, but perplexing time. Prospective mothers with dreams for the future, holding within them the proof of God's holy imagination that things can be different. It is such a beautiful example for us today, in these uncertain times. To celebrate with each other, and delight in ways that God is breaking into our world, even when we are unsure what the future holds. That is church at its best.

I wonder...

- Who are the prophets in your life, naming the activity of God in our midst?
- Where and when you have been the prophet, glimpsing God's dreams unfolding in your life?
- What it means to be a faithful dreamer – immersing yourself in God's holy imagination and taking action to make change?
- How God is luring us toward awe and wonder?
- Who you share God's dreams of love with?

Prayer:

God of Good News,

You say to me, "You are highly favored," but I struggle to see how that could be.

You say to me, "Do not be afraid," but I am afraid all the time.

You say to me, "Even the impossible is possible, just look at Elizabeth!"

But hope slips through my hands like water.

The impossible still feels impossible.

So today I pray,

Today we pray:

Teach us to sing like Mary.

Teach us to laugh like Elizabeth.

Teach us to trust like the angels.

Forgive us when we have a hard time believing that the impossible is possible.

Amen.

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