

Advent 2022

Scripture and Sermon

Luke 1:26-55

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²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Gabriel had been busy. Most recently this angelic messenger encountered Zechariah in the temple. I reminded us earlier that, at the sight of the angel, Zechariah freaked out, to which Gabriel responded, "Do not be afraid." Angels always say that. Do not be afraid of what? Of Gabriel? Or of Gabriel's message? In this case, probably both. The angel was probably a little bit scary looking or at least startling. And then the news that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a baby was scary, even if it was good news. Zechariah and Elizabeth were not youngsters or even middle age-sters, so "shocking" may be a better word. Scarily shocking? Truthfully, Zechariah's reaction to Gabriel seems more on brand for a lot of us than the way the author describes Mary's reaction.

Mary did not freak out. The text says she was, "perplexed." She was probably 12 or 13 years old. Zechariah, an elderly priest, freaked out and a teenage girl was just perplexed. I love that. What was it about what the angel said that perplexed

her? It was the way in which Gabriel addressed her, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” “Favored one...” It is unlikely Mary considered herself favored. She was a woman (a girl by our standards) in a highly patriarchal culture. She was Jewish, her home occupied by the Romans, her people oppressed, impoverished, and constantly under the thumb of the Roman government. Being called “favored” would certainly have been perplexing.

Gabriel, of course, responded to Mary, “Do not be afraid.” Since Mary was not yet afraid, we can assume this particular “Do not be afraid,” corresponded to the contents of the message about to be delivered. And it was a doozy. It was another announcement of an impending birth. Not just any birth, though. This baby would be special. Mary had been chosen to be the mother of the one that would save her people. That’s a lot. You see, Mary was engaged, but not married. Nobody would be more surprised than her future husband. Yet, that did not stop her from responding, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

I wonder what her voice sounded like. I wonder if the words caught in her throat. Did she sound scared? Defiant? Unlike Zechariah, Mary believed the angel. She didn’t ask for proof. She didn’t even try refusing to be involved in God’s plan. She accepted it. Mary’s acceptance of the angel’s message is extraordinary because being pregnant before marriage could have resulted in serious, maybe deadly, consequences if Joseph rejected her. Moving into the “what is” of the moment rather than sticking with the “how can this be?” was brave, especially for someone without much life experience. Sometimes we waste time wishing things were not the way they are. When we do that, our ability to creatively see beyond our undesirable situation is diminished by all the energy we spend on the denial or passively waiting for things to change *for us*. There is some peace that comes when we accept *what is* and use our energy to live into the *what’s next*.

We all have ways of dealing with the unpleasant parts of life. Some are healthier than others. A lot of us deny or avoid, at least temporarily, the reality of what is happening. We don’t answer the phone when the bill collector calls. We don’t go to the doctor, even when our symptoms persist. We see a water spot on the ceiling, but don’t investigate the source. Our car makes a weird noise, or the check engine light comes on and we just keep driving it. We choose not to stay informed about what’s happening in the world because it makes us anxious. The

problem is that acting like these things aren't happening, denying reality, does nothing to change anything. We still don't have the money to pay the bill. We are still sick. Our roof still has a leak, and our car still needs attention. The people in Ukraine are still suffering and gun violence is still killing people in our country. I am not suggesting it's easy to deal with any of this. It takes courage.

Christian tradition, artists, and even songwriters have perpetuated a version of Mary that the Mary in this story wouldn't recognize. Not only is she very often made white, she is also portrayed as "meek and mild," rather than bold and brave. The speed with which she faced her reality and leaned into what was before her, even though it was hard, scary, and dangerous, and would turn her life upside-down, was anything but meek and mild. It was bold. It was brave. Having heard Gabriel's message, Mary left to go see her cousin, Elizabeth, who the angel told her was also expecting a baby.

There is intimacy between them. I imagine the surprise on Elizabeth's face as her unborn child "leaped for joy" as they met. And then...for just a little while, these two women were the only two people in the whole world to know what God was doing in and through them. In the author of Luke's story, Mary hadn't told anyone else about her angelic encounter, about the child she was carrying, or her role in the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel.

In a world steeped in patriarchy, somehow this story of two women birthing something new, something important, into the world, has been left to us. Whether it actually happened like this is not the point. The point is that in the kingdom of God, ordinary people have a place, women have a place, and it is not in the background being meek and mild, seen and not heard. No, in the kingdom of God, women are creating, leading, and walking bravely and boldly into the future, even when the future is uncertain.

While Mary and Elizabeth were together, Mary shared this song which is, all by itself, a sermon.

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for God has looked with favor on the lowly state of God's 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 God's name;
⁵⁰ indeed, God's mercy is for those who fear God
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ God has shown strength with God's arm;
and has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
⁵² God has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ and filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ God has come to the aid of God's child Israel,
in remembrance of God's mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Episcopal Priest, Elise Hanley writes, about what we call the Magnificat, that it is a song "of liberation: personal and social, moral, and economic. It is a manifesto, a revolutionary proclamation of conflict and victory. It praises God's liberating actions: in the transformed social order, all is reversed. For Mary, it is also personal: God has taken direct interest in her. God has called her...Mary sings of the world being turned upside down: of hierarchies subverted, the mighty brought down. Two marginalized, pregnant women together proclaim the future, and the coming of Jesus, the Messiah...Mary, who seems amazed at what has happened, sings of God as savior. Mary reminds us, in our Advent waiting, that we cannot look to any other power for salvation from the chaos we are in. Neither technology, education, social progress, or legislation will deliver us. Only God can save us.¹ It's important to understand that for the author of Luke and for the people of Israel, salvation was not about saving sinners from the hands of an angry God. Salvation was about saving the people from oppression, injustice, occupation, and hunger.

Mary sings of hope, the kind of hope we talked about last week, the kind that sees beyond present circumstances to a future in which people and circumstances will be changed. The season of Advent invites us to hope with her. Mary's words of praise land as if everything she sang about had already happened. Amid what seems like chaos, Mary had peace, peace that came from finding her place and

¹ <https://eliseexegetes.com/2019/11/13/yes-mary-knew/>, accessed 12/2/22.

living into her purpose, peace that came from the assurance that she was part of God somehow, someday making everything right. Mary faced what was wrong in the world, the oppression, injustice, violence, patriarchy, and poverty, not with denial and fear, but with boldness and bravery and she reminds us that, very often, peace, like hope, is found in places that are on the other side of our own comfort.

This week at Pub Theology, we discussed some theological quotes that bug us. The quote I shared was one I read early last week, and it stayed with me because it unsettled me. Rev. Mark Sandlin, a pretty well-known progressive Presbyterian minister, wrote it. His words caught me off guard because I usually agree with what he says.

He said,

“Stop trying to be 'who God created you to be.'

That's not just bad theology, it's uninspiring fatalism.

Strive to be who you want to become.

That's not only good theology, it's hopeful self-determination.”

I explained to the group that one of the reasons I was finding this quote troubling is that I say often “be who God created you to be” or “we should be the church God created us to be.” How can that be “bad theology?”

Since Rev. Sandlin was not present to talk to us about the quote, we spent some time talking about what he may have been trying to get at when he wrote it. What we came to, I think, was that the “bad theology” he was talking about was the idea that human desires are innately sinful. If we believe that, we must be who and what God created us to be because we cannot be trusted to want to become anything good left to our own desires. The people sitting around the table at Hideaway Thursday night did not believe that about human beings. In fact, the consensus was that we can be trusted to strive to become what we want to become. We have the capacity to desire to be and be virtuous. We want to be generous. We want to be compassionate. We want to have a positive impact on the world. So, how can being those things not also be being who God created us to be? We concluded that we can be what and who we want to be *and* be who God created us to be.

I want to believe, based on the stories about Mary in the gospel writings, that God created Mary to be bold and brave and that Mary had the desire to be those things too. I want to believe that had Mary had a mirror to see her reflection every morning, she would have looked at herself and said, "You are enough. You are brave. What you are and who you are matters in this world." I want to believe she found peace in knowing that the world is better because she said, "Here am I," that day.

I think it would have been tough for Mary some days. I think it would have been tough the night Jesus took his first breath, there, among the animals. It would have been tough when her family had to flee Israel for Egypt to escape King Herod. It would have been tough when she temporarily lost Jesus when he was 12 years old and stayed behind at the Temple. It would have been tough when she realized that his message was going to get him killed. And I cannot imagine how tough it would have been the day she stood at the foot of the cross as she watched him take his last breath.

What came to me this week is that we need to believe Mary found peace in who she was and what her reality was so that we can find peace in the parts of our lives that are hard and in who we are growing to be. There is peace in doing the hard things and in living into who we dream of being. There is peace in "being the hero of your own story."

I think Mary was that and because she was, she, like Gabriel, became a messenger of the Holy too. She was a messenger to Elizabeth and has been a messenger to all of us, maybe especially to women. Her message being, "The kin-dom of God is for all of us." I hope that truth brings you peace today and inspires each of us to carry that Holy message to the world.

I will end this morning with this blessing because we can all use a blessing. It was written by Jan Richardson:

To all that is chaotic

in you,

let there come silence.

Let there be

a calming

of the clamoring,

a stilling

of the voices that

have laid their claim
on you,
that have made their
home in you,
that go with you
even to the
holy places
but will not
let you rest,
will not let you
hear your life
with wholeness
or feel the grace
that fashioned you.
Let what distracts you
cease.
Let what divides you
cease.
Let there come an end
to what diminishes
and demeans,
and let depart
all that keeps you
in its cage.
Let there be
an opening
into the quiet
that lies beneath
the chaos,
where you find
the peace
you did not think
possible
and see what shimmers
within the storm.

~ Jan Richardson, paintedprayerbook.com

Amen.