

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 19, 2021

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In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said,

*"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

Luke 1:39-55

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

These words from our Gospel reading today are the beginning of the Magnificat. Also called The Song of Mary, this is the song Mary sings in response to Elizabeth's blessing. In the Gospel according to Luke, people are always singing. Zechariah sang when John was born and he was finally able to speak again. Elizabeth cries out in song when she is filled with the Holy Spirit. Later when Jesus is presented in the temple, Simeon will also sing with joy.

The Gospel of Luke is the only gospel that gives us the backstory for John the Baptizer. We learn about his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who have their own annunciation story. The Angel Gabriel appears to them in their old age to announce that they will have a son, for nothing will be impossible with God. When Gabriel visits Mary to announce that she too will bear a son, we learn that Elizabeth and Mary are relatives, and Mary goes with haste to see Elizabeth. The Angel Gabriel is just full of information, isn't he?

Even so, when the angel appeared to tell Mary that she had found favor with God and that she would conceive and bear a son, it turned her world upside down. At first, Mary could not believe it and did not understand. She said, "How can this be?" And you know there was a whole lot more than *that* going on inside of Mary than was expressed in those four words. How can this be? I am a virgin and I am not married. It's not what my parents have arranged for me, it's not the way I thought my life would go. How do I explain this to the people I love? What will the townspeople think? I'm not sure I can go through with this impossible change in front of me. How can this be?

But then, imagine an angel appearing before you to say, "God has something for you to do, you are favored by God, and nothing will be impossible with God."

Of course, we would be afraid. Of course, Mary was afraid. And of course, the angel knew that, because before he even gave her the details he said, “Do not be afraid!” Then Gabriel told her that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her, and she would bear a child to be called Son of God. Son of God? How can this be?

When has your life been interrupted unexpectedly? I’m sure we can all relate and name those times in our lives. And we are in the midst of one of those times, now, in this place. We may be asking “How can this be?” This story about unexpected change for Mary and also Elizabeth, is a story that we can understand. The words of Gabriel are for us. Fear not!

Mary came to understand that she was part of God’s greater plan, a plan that included others, so she would not be alone in this. That is why she was able to say, “Here I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.” Today’s reading picks up here as Mary set out and went with haste to the hill country to see Elizabeth. And when Mary greeted Elizabeth, the child John leaped in Elizabeth’s womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and cried out because she knew immediately that Mary was the mother of her Lord, the mother of the Son of God.

And when these two women were connected by the power of the Spirit to do God’s work, to fulfill God’s promise, suddenly their world, the whole world, was turned upside down and anything seemed possible! Imagine these two women, both unexpectedly pregnant, of no means, no great social status, no political power – no earthly power at all, really. But because they believed that it could be possible with God, because they trusted and were obedient and said yes, the whole world was about to be turned upside down.

The coming of the Messiah who will redeem Israel is anticipated and proclaimed, not by high priests or emperors, but by these two faithful women. Together Mary and Elizabeth understood themselves as part of something larger than their individual desires and particular lives. This idea that we are part of something larger than our own personal preferences and desires is key to the coming of God’s kingdom. It is manifested in love and care for one another. Mary cannot help but proclaim this impossible thing and she bursts into song to announce God’s new upside down world.

What might God be calling us to turn upside down today? When we are invited to be a part of God’s plan, it may seem impossible and we may be afraid. How can this be? How can we do this impossible thing? But then look around – there will be someone else, maybe an angel in disguise, a relative or a friend, perhaps someone we don’t even know; but there will be someone who is also invited to be part of God’s plan with us. Because we do not fulfill God’s promises all by ourselves. And we don’t need a list of credentials to participate. We only need to be open to the power of the Holy Spirit, and willing to believe that with God all things are possible.

Methodist Bishop and theologian Will Willimon has noted that, other than the Trinity, only Pontius Pilate and Mary are mentioned by name in the Creed we confess each week. “Pontius Pilate said no to Jesus, Mary said yes—the two poles of human response to God. Even though Mary was warned that Jesus would be a sword through her heart, she magnified God anyway, clinch-fistedly singing that the baby in her womb would cast down the proud, send the rich away empty, and fill the poor with good things.”

God wants to turn the world upside down and has promised to help God’s servants. Where in this new upside down world that is coming will you fit? How will you participate, and what will be your Magnificat?

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant...

The Mighty One has done great things for us and holy is his name.