

Luke 1: 26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God." 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.

Luke 1: 39-56

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."

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

This is the fourth Sunday of Advent, our annual season of preparation for Christmas. Thus far, we've heard from the prophets Daniel, Joel, and Isaiah. Each of

these prophets had great hope. Each spoke about the coming Messiah, and explained who this was and that he would save Israel.

This Sunday, we hear the familiar words of a birth announcement. A birth announcement is more than a pragmatic, “Hey, update your address books – we have another name to list on our entry in your Christmas card list.” It’s more than letting the church know to expect another kid in the nursery, or telling your friends to expect a high chair for a while at your get-togethers.

Every birth announcement tells the story of hopes and dreams. Every birth announcement tells the story of the world forever changing, at least the individual worlds of those parents and their child. I know that, personally, I will never forget the morning of June 20, 2001, when NICU¹ nurse Melinda Macqueen handed me my daughter, and my world forever changed. It was one thing to know that my wife was pregnant, and even to make preparations for the baby. It was another to look down at the baby girl in my arms. I’m sure that many of you could tell similar stories, though the stories are different for mothers than for the rest of us.

This birth announcement tells the story of hopes and dreams, but they are the hopes and dreams of an entire nation, over centuries. They are the hopes and dreams of all the years before. This birth announcement tells the story of a world changing, but it is the whole world that will be forever changed. Gabriel tells a teenager that she will conceive and bear a child.

Mary is young, but not stupid. Growing up in an agricultural community, she knows where babies come from. She asks how this is going to work. Gabriel tells her

¹ Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. My daughter was born by emergency C-section because she was in some distress, and the NICU team were brought in, just in case they were needed.

that she will be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, and that the child will be the Son of God. Gabriel tells her that her relative Elizabeth, who was thought to be barren, has conceived a son. Gabriel reminds her of something she already knows – that nothing is impossible for God.

Mary thinks about this. She really thinks about it. She ponders it in her heart. And she gives the messenger of God the right answer.

“I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.”

As soon as the angel is gone, Mary goes to see Elizabeth. She has accepted what the angel said on faith, but she wants to see for herself at least something he said. She goes to the house of Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, and, lo and behold, Elizabeth is indeed pregnant! Not just pregnant, but visibly pregnant! Six months pregnant!

Elizabeth’s child, John, kicks when Elizabeth hears Mary’s voice. Even in the womb, John knows who this is. And Elizabeth says to Mary, “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” Elizabeth says that Mary is blessed because she believed that what the Lord told her through the angel Gabriel would actually happen.

And then Mary sings an amazing song. This song is often called “*The Magnificat*,” after the first word in the Latin version. “*Magnificat*” means “I glorify.” I’ve heard this song described as a continuation of the Old Testament Hymns to God, as the first of the New Testament hymns to God, and even as the world’s first punk song.² In

² Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, who knows both punk and the Bible, and thus gets to say things like that.

this song, she lays out for all the world and in the name of the world, all those hopes and dreams that she has, and that all of Israel have for this child and how he will change the world.

““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.” God did not commit sin. God should be, by rights, all the way up there, away from the mud and the blood and the compromises of this broken world. But God is going to come right down here and walk the Earth with us. And not to judge us, but to save us. God loves us that much.³

“...The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” God has done great things here, things that no one expected. This child, Jesus, whose very name means, “God saves,”⁴ will literally, no exaggeration, save the world.

“His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” Jesus came and brought mercy and love to all those who show proper respect to God.⁵ God’s love is not just for the people who saw him walking the Earth, but from generation to generation, even to us, many generations later.

“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.” God is far stronger than any human being, far more powerful even than

³ John 3:16-17.

⁴ *Ye-shua*, or “God saves.”

⁵ The Greek word φοβούμενοις can mean to fear, or simply to show proper reverence and respect.

the Emperor in Rome. God has the power to do whatever God wants, and God chooses to love us.

“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.” Jesus turns the values of the world upside down, doesn’t he?

He teaches anyone who will listen that self-promotion and self-aggrandizement are not the point of human existence. He asks his followers the rhetorical question, what profit is in it for a person to gain the whole world, and lose their soul.⁶

He teaches anyone who will listen not to cower before powerful people, because we serve a God far more powerful than any earthly king or president.

He teaches anyone who will listen to reach out to outcasts and those on the margins of society, even if those people are on the margins for good reasons.

He teaches anyone who will listen to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoner. Not to resist evil-doers or seek revenge, and to love their enemies.⁷

These are not the values of our broken world, then or now. They are profoundly counter-cultural. They are the values of God. They are values that God has been trying to teach these stubborn people for generations, through the prophets. Now God will come into the world to teach us those values.

“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.” This is

⁶ Luke 9:25

⁷ Matthew 5:38-48

not a completely new thing. God has had a relationship with God's people the Hebrews for thousands of years. God has made them promises and God has kept those promises. We spent all Fall talking about those promises and how God kept them.

But with this child, God is keeping those promises in a new way, and opening up the relationship to all the human beings whom God has created. No longer do you basically have to be born the child of a Jewish mother to be part of God's people.

Truly I tell you, God loves you. God does not love you because of who your parents were or are. God does not love you because of who any of your other relatives were or are. God does not love you because of your kids.

God does not love you because of what you have done. You cannot earn God's love with many good deeds. You already have it. Yes, we should be doing good things, in accordance with those values we mentioned, but that is our response to a God who loves us before we are even able to respond.

God loves you, for you. God made you the way you are, and God wants you to become more fully yourself, in relationship with God. That is why Jesus came to Earth, two thousand years ago. That is the good news of Jesus Christ.

That is why we are preparing for Christmas. God is coming to Earth to change our lives forever. God wants each of us to be more fully ourselves, in relationship with the God who loves us. God wants each of us to work to bring God's peace and God's love to all of God's Creation.

This week I pray for all of us that we would truly say in our hearts, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said."

AMEN.