

Mary's Hope  
Luke 1: 26-56

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Doug Browne  
December 20, 2020 (Advent 4)

Luke 1: 26-56

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 for ever, 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.

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 leapt 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 leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment 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 for ever.'

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

The Hebrew Scriptures have several stories of a woman who would not be expected to become pregnant, becoming pregnant and having a baby. Whether this woman is named Sarai or Rebekah, Rachel or Hannah, the birth is desperately wanted and hoped for, and the resulting baby has stories told about him.

This is the context in which Gabriel tells a young virgin named Mary that she's going to conceive and bear a son. Mary has a different reason that this is a surprise – unlike the other women I mentioned, who were barren, she has not yet put it to the test. Unlike the previous women I mentioned, all married, she is not yet supposed to be pregnant, but she will be.

Mary accepts that she will be pregnant. She knows that she will face social consequences for this. She knows that she will be slut-shamed and worse. She knows that she will bear a son who will be called the Son of God.

Mary does not just accept what God is doing here. She leans into it. Instead of complaining about what God is doing TO her, she rejoices and praises God, for doing such mighty things FOR her.

She may not know all the details of what Jesus would do – walking on water and healing blind people, calming storms and the like.<sup>1</sup> She doesn't need to know. She knows the most important part – that through this baby God will change the world. That, through this baby, God will bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty.

---

<sup>1</sup> Allusion to the lyrics of the popular Christmas song *Mary, Did You Know?* intentional. That song really is a mansplaining mess. Mary knew the important parts.

That, through this baby, God will help God's people Israel, living in their occupied land, as God promised Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

That is as much of what's happening here as Mary is equipped to understand.

It's a lot. The idea that kings and emperors will be thrown down from their thrones and the lowly lifted up, God has the power to do that, but it does not seem to happen very often. The idea that the poor will be filled with good food and the rich told to get their own, that is in line with how God does things, but it's a reversal of how we're used to the world working. We're used to the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, the powerful acquiring more and more power, while the powerless get pushed further and further out on the margins.

That's as much as Mary is equipped to understand. I don't know how she envisions God doing these things, but I suspect it involves armies, the way that kings are normally removed from their thrones.

But, for the rest of her life, as Caroline Grindrod said, "God never stops expanding Mary's imagination of what's possible. It starts with a virgin mother and leads her to find an empty tomb and a resurrected son."<sup>2</sup>

God is doing so much more than she imagines, more than she can imagine. With Jesus, God is no longer sending representatives into the world to speak to

---

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Grindrod, *How Do You Carry a Promise From God?*, sermon delivered at Parkside Church, Charleston, SC, on December 13, 2020.

God's people. God is coming Godself. With Jesus, God is expanding God's people from one people, twelve tribes, to include everyone who believes in him, no matter their race or ancestry. With Jesus, God is changing the basic relationship between God and God's people from one based on the Law, and constantly making atonement for one's sins, to one based on Love, like God always wanted in the first place.

God is doing more than Mary can imagine now, but she leans into it. She praises God for what she understands of what God is doing, and she trusts God for the rest.

She fully participates in what God is doing. She bears Jesus. She endures the shaming that I'm sure she gets for being pregnant before her wedding day. She gives birth in a space fit for animals, and lays her baby in an animal feeding trough. She raises this little boy, who I'm sure was difficult to deal with. She watches as he goes about his ministry, even when she doesn't completely understand what he's doing and saying.

Her understanding expands as she goes along. Eventually she watches as he is executed for a crime he did not commit, and she walks away from the cross with one of his disciples. Then, in one more last surprise, she goes to his tomb to prepare his body for burial, and finds it empty and her son resurrected, for all of us.

God is doing things in the world today. God is doing things around us, whether we understand them or not. Wherever the hungry are fed and the naked

clothed, where the sick are healed and the poor lifted up from the gutter, there is God at work.

We may not understand it all right now. As a matter of fact, I bet none of us do. But that's okay.

Let's all follow Mary's example. Praise God for all the good things we see that God is doing in the world. Lean into them. Help where we can, using whatever resources and power we have.

Watch what God is doing, and ponder these things in our hearts. And be open for our imagination to be expanded as time goes on. Be open to seeing God doing more and more miraculous things. Often we can only really understand them in retrospect, after the fact. But they're happening right now.

Because God's not done with this world.

God's not done with us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.