

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
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Singing Mary's Song

Luke 1:39-55 • Fourth Sunday in Advent

In that story we have a portrait of God at work changing the world. But consider just how God is at work. We see two pregnant women. One of them, Elizabeth, is old, well advanced in age, which presumably means beyond childbearing age; yet she is miraculously pregnant. That should send chills of recognition to any of you familiar with the Hebrew ancestral stories. And we know, don't we, that in that culture a barren woman would have been considered cursed by God. So for Elizabeth to be pregnant was miraculous, a remarkable blessing, certainly an answer to many prayers. But it was also clearly understood to be an act of God who works in mysterious ways to accomplish God's will.

By contrast, the much younger woman, Mary, was not married, yet pregnant. And we know, don't we, that young women who get pregnant outside marriage are often treated badly by friends and neighbors alike. Sometimes they're ostracized. If they aren't ostracized, they are certainly the subject of much gossip and easily condemned as promiscuous. Unlike Elizabeth, Mary has no precedent in ancient story to support her claim. Only disbelieving neighbors and skeptical relatives and friends. Except for Elizabeth, of course. For when Mary walks in the door Elizabeth pronounces a blessing, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Elizabeth, at least, knows what to believe.

Each of us knows of one or two of those situations. Maybe we were caught up in them ourselves. Nowadays it's not so unusual for an older woman to have a baby. Nor for that matter is it unusual for younger, unmarried women to get pregnant. And our reaction to that is similar today as it surely was then. So it comes as no surprise that Mary, before she was even showing, might just disappear to visit a cousin in the hill country. Same kind of thing happens nowadays as well. Yet this biblical story claims something else. These are no ordinary pregnancies. These two pregnancies are nothing less than a mighty act of God.

Now most people imagine God working in grand, dramatic ways. Certainly when God created the heavens and earth that was a grand, dramatic act. God said, "Let there be light, and (BANG) there was light." When God set the Hebrews free from Egypt, it was through a crescendo of dramatic plagues building up to the awful death of all Egyptian firstborn. When Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, God caused the walls to come tumbling down. That's an amazing story as well. So we shouldn't be surprised that when people think about God at work, they think in terms of drama on a grand scale.

God, on the other hand, usually chooses to work mysteriously. What was it the psalmist wrote about God watching our bones take shape when we were being knit together in the womb? Imagine God coming becoming human, as an infant born of a peasant woman! Hardly a grand dramatic act, even when we consider the miraculous virginal conception. Why would God become human, and be born as an infant? What power does an infant have to change the world? For that matter what can a poor, young woman, pregnant out of wedlock, accomplish? And why would Elizabeth say that the child in her womb was blessed just because her own child leapt in the womb? What an interesting and mysterious story this is!

Before Jesus was born, Mary sang about God accomplishing great and remarkable things in her. Notice that she does not say God will accomplish great things, but that God has accomplished great things. She doesn't say that God will bring down the powerful, but that God has brought down the powerful. She

does not say that God will lift up the lowly, but that God has lifted up the lowly. Not that God will fill the hungry with good things, but that God has filled the hungry with good things. Her song is no prophecy of future accomplishment. It's a celebration of already done deals. She exclaims that in her pregnancy, God has turned the world upside down, keeping the promise made to Abraham and Sarah long ago.

Is Mary out of her mind? You don't have to work on Wall Street to know that the rich are still rich. You don't have to travel to Immokalee to learn that the poor are still poor. Don't have to live in Washington to realize that the powerful are still powerful. Don't have to go down to St. Matthews House to see that the hungry are still hungry. Yet Mary exclaims that in this child, her unborn child, God has already accomplished turned the tables. What God has done is not someday off in the future, we're reminded; but God has accomplished, past perfect, done deal. In her pregnancy God has undone the world order. It's a fait accompli. Or so Mary claims.

Instead of being out of her mind, maybe Mary sees God at work in the world differently than she did before. I wonder if the fact that we see things differently than Mary says more about us than it does about her? The fact that we don't see what Mary sees and hear what Mary hears might just call into question our eyes and our ears. You and I are well conditioned to think of power in terms of strength and coercion. Mary says that's all undone. Compared to God's power the powerful are really nothing. Compared to God's riches the rich are actually quite poor. Compared to God's strength, the strong are really quite weak. As a result Mary is not afraid. Not afraid of being pregnant out of wedlock, not afraid of what people might say or think about her, not afraid of the powers that be, not afraid to live into the future God has promised.

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan wrote: "You see that Mary did not doubt but believed and therefore obtained the fruit of faith. 'Blessed... are you who have believed.' But you also are blessed who have heard and believed. For a soul that has believed has both conceived and bears the Word of God and declares his works. Let the soul of Mary be in each of you, so that it magnifies the Lord. Let the spirit of Mary be in each of you, so that it rejoices in God."¹

I wonder what it would be like to sing Mary's song. How would we be different if we agreed with Mary that the powers of the world were powerless? What would it feel like to live without fear in a society paralyzed by fear? What if, instead of seeing scarcity, and thus grasping at our abundance... What if we saw the abundance God has provided and felt free to share it with those who are in great need? What great joy might we feel if we chose to sing along with Mary?

Well I don't know about you, but I don't think it's easy to sing Mary's song. I have both feet planted firmly in this world. But there's this nagging spirit that won't let me rest easy every time I read the Bible. I feel an urging every time I worship and pray, an urging to live trusting God and to sing and joyful song. I don't know about you, but once in awhile I catch myself humming along. I'm guessing you do too. Like when you donate to Habitat or the Heifer project. Or when you bring a bag of groceries in for Feed 5000. Or when you volunteer at Grace Place. Or when you simply say, "Thank you Lord!" Those are the notes of the song of hope that knows God is in charge; and God is doing great things in this world, for us and in us and through us, even when those things seem insignificant, like a poor woman getting pregnant in a mysterious way long ago.

¹ Ambrose: Exposition of the Gospel of Luke as quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, Vol. 3, Luke*, Ed. Arthur A. Just, Jr. (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2003.), 22