

Advent Sermon

Luke 1:39-55

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My parents came into town last weekend to spend time with the grandchildren and to come to worship. And, just like always, my mother came bearing gifts. One of the gifts was a book about the birth of the baby Jesus. My mother and 5-year-old Hannah began reading it together. It told a very sweet version of the Christmas story—beginning when the Angel Gabriel came to tell Mary what was going to happen in and to her. The book stated, “and when the angel told Mary she was going to have the baby Jesus, Mary was very happy.” At that point Hannah stopped my mother. “Well, actually Nini, that’s wrong. Mary was afraid.” My mother looked back at Hannah, a little shocked. “Well, yes—you are right, Hannah. At first Mary was afraid.”

Indeed. Mary was afraid. *Of course* she was afraid. We all know why – she was probably around 14 years old, betrothed to a man she hardly knew, getting ready to leave her parent’s house for his house. And then—the angel. The pronouncement of this baby, God’s baby, who was going to grow inside of her. Her sudden desire to say “yes” to that happening and then her quick double-take at what had just happened and what she had just agreed to do. *Of course* Mary was afraid.

And so Mary hightailed it out of there and headed to her cousin Elizabeth’s house, because she did not know where else to go. Luke gentles her fear when he reports “in those days Mary set out and went with haste.” You’d better believe she went with haste. She got out of her parents’ house as quickly as she could and went to the only other place she was going to feel safe—her cousin Elizabeth’s house. After all, the angel had told her that Elizabeth was carrying around her own growing miracle. The angel had promised Mary that her old and barren cousin Elizabeth was sixth months pregnant. Mary knew that if indeed the angel’s words could be trusted, that Elizabeth’s house was the only place to which she could run.

And so she ran. With haste. Afraid. Stunned. Overwhelmed by it all. Finally, she arrived and burst into Elizabeth’s house. And her eyes must have gone right to Elizabeth’s sixth month pregnant belly. And her old cousin Elizabeth must have taken one look back at Mary and felt the child in her womb do a dance of joy. So Elizabeth shouted out, right there in her living room, “Blessed are you among women, my Mary. And blessed is that God-baby growing in your body.”

Blessed? Mary had not thought of it like that yet. She had only thought of the “oh no” parts of her life. She had not yet considered that she was blessed. As Mary stood mute with surprise and confusion, Elizabeth made the first Christological confession of faith in the Gospel of Luke. “And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” And Elizabeth declares Mary blessed a few more times.

Mary must have been dumbfounded at this quick turn of events. She had been caught up in the fear, the “oh no” parts of her life. She was very young, engaged, still at home with her mom and dad, and now pregnant with God’s baby? That is a lot of “oh no” to handle all at once. In all her haste to get to Elizabeth’s house, she had completely forgotten what the angel had called her when he first laid his holy eyes on

her face: “Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you.”

Those were the angel’s first words – words spoken even before he tried to calm her down and tell her not to be afraid. The very first thing that angel did was call this young, unmarried, terrified, poor girl “blessed,” “favored one.” But it was not until Elizabeth reacted with such joy and confidence that Mary even remembered that part of the conversation. Mary had gotten so caught up in the fear, in the “oh no” parts of her life, that she had completely forgotten how the angel first addressed her—as blessed, as favored one, as one the Lord her God claimed.

Mary must have just stood there, trying to catch her breath after moving with such haste. She must have looked at her cousin’s pregnant belly, then up to Elizabeth’s weathered and wrinkled face shining with joy and wonder, and back down to her belly again. Maybe she even put her hands on her own young stomach—trying to feel what could not yet be felt—the stirrings of a miracle, the stirrings of new life.

Mary must have just stood there, trying to catch her breath, trying to get her mind around all that was happening to her. She was so young, still at home with mom and dad, engaged to be married to a man she really did not know. She was poor, ordinary, a girl. And she was so afraid at what had just happened with that angel and her quick response of “yes” that had come out of her mouth from who knows where in her soul. But then, Mary looked at Elizabeth’s shining wrinkled face, saw her pregnant belly, heard her words of blessing and love, and God unleashed something in Mary’s soul. All of a sudden, Mary could release some of those “oh no’s” and some of that fear. All of a sudden, she felt a new kind of clarity and realized that for whatever reason, God had chosen her. God had chosen her. She was young. She was poor. She was ordinary. And God had chosen her, called her blessed, made her favored.

All of a sudden, in a moment of clarity in Elizabeth’s living room, Mary realized that her status and her identity had nothing to do with her age or her station in life or anything else like that. Her identity was that she was a child of God, embraced by God’s blessing and claim, no matter how scared she was or how ordinary she felt or what other people might say about her as her own belly grew. She was blessed by God, called “favored one,” and pregnant with a miraculous God-child. And when that clarity broke out in her mind, Mary was filled with such joy and gratitude that she could not do anything but sing. She could not keep from singing.

“My soul gives glory to my God, my heart pours out its praise. God lifted up my lowliness in many marvelous ways.”

Right there, in the middle of Elizabeth’s living room, Mary burst out into song. She sang a song of praise of all that God had done, was doing, would do—and not just for her. Mary sang a song of praise for all who would benefit from God’s actions. She praised God for relieving the proud and powerful of their swelled heads and overblown sense of self-importance. She praised God for filling the hungry with good things and lifting up the lowly. She praised God for sending the rich away empty so they might have room in them for more than money can buy. She praised God for God’s continuing mercy and work of justice-making. Mary burst out into song not just for herself, but on behalf of every son and daughter who thought God had forgotten God’s covenant, God’s promise to be with them forever, to love them forever, to give them fresh and endless life.

Mary burst out into song for you and for me—sons and daughters living so many years later but still living in Advent time—in the time between God’s coming to set

things right and God's returning to finish the job. Mary was filled with such joy and gratitude that she could not do anything but sing a song of praise for all God's children and the way God was breaking out into the world and into our history, through her and through the child in her womb who, at that point, was no bigger than a thumbnail.

Mary stood right there in the middle of Elizabeth's living room and she sang and sang and sang. She must have sung until her voice became hoarse and she had to sit down on the couch, exhausted. She must have sung until she felt all the joy and gratitude and praise that had been properly unleashed into the world and could now grow on its own. She must have sung until she had forgotten about her fear and all the "oh no" parts of her life. She must have sung until she felt a deep sense of peace and holy presence and courage.

And when her song was over, she and Elizabeth must have started comparing notes about what had happened to them, about the angel, about what Zechariah had done and about what Joseph might do. Elizabeth might have told her about the best ways to cope with morning sickness, about the perils of swollen ankles, about how you never really get a good night's sleep when growing a child. And Mary probably spent a lot of time resting and pondering God's blessing, God's claim on her—and not only on her—but also God's claim on all flesh that would soon be birthed into the world through her body.

And maybe she hoped that her song would be written down one day and remembered. Maybe Mary hoped that as the generations passed, her song of joy and gratitude and praise would be sung by other men and women when they felt overwhelmed by fear and the "oh no" parts of their lives. Maybe Mary hoped her song would be sung by other girls and boys who felt too ordinary, too poor, too low to count for anything or as anybody.

Maybe Mary hoped that by unleashing her song out into God's world, that anyone who heard it would remember that God also blessed them, claimed them, promised to grow new life in them as well. And maybe, just maybe, in the three months that followed, every once in a while Mary and Elizabeth would sing a stanza or two together.

"Praise God whose loving covenant supports those in distress, remembering past promises with present faithfulness."

Because, after all, in the face of God's goodness, they could not keep from singing.