

The Fourth Sunday of Advent [Year C]

Micah 5:2-5a

LUKE 1:46b-55

Hebrews 10:5-10

LUKE 1:39-45

A Sermon for Every Sunday

Where would we be without the faith of Mary and Elizabeth?

It's hard to say. I'm sure that God would have found a way for the good news to break into human history to bring about his kingdom, but God didn't have to: Mary and Elizabeth come through. Mary and Elizabeth, in a day and age that so much of the time overlooked women become the people through whom the Lord of grace makes his entrance. In a day and age when women were often given little voice, Mary and Elizabeth shout and sing and become examples of the power in believing...in believing that God might be up to something new...in believing that the miraculous might happen.

Where would we be without the faith of Mary and Elizabeth? To begin with, look at Mary! She takes off to see Elizabeth up in the Judean hill country all by herself. Who does she think she is? Most historians tell us that people didn't just up and travel unless they had some compelling cultural reason. And women would almost never do something so bold, especially while carrying a child! By going onto something like secluded bedrest for five months, Elizabeth had done the more socially and medically expected thing. Clearly Mary believes she must be blessed, that the baby she carries in her womb can ward off danger on the road.

And then look at Elizabeth! Immediately upon seeing Mary, she shouts out in joy. The child in her own womb kicks right when Mary enters in the house. Elizabeth overflows in her blessing of Mary. We can just see them, can't we, throwing their arms up in the air and hugging each other over and over, happy to see each other, happy for new beginnings. Elizabeth becomes the first person in the story of Luke to call Jesus "Lord," which is, interestingly enough, what Jesus will mainly be called after his resurrection. Here, right at the beginning, just as he does after his resurrection, Jesus is already bringing signs of new life. And Elizabeth is the first to notice it.

And then there was Mary's big "yes" to the angel Gabriel in the first place. That's the truly astounding part of this, what gets the whole ball rolling. What would we do without it? In contrast to Elizabeth's husband, the priest Zechariah, Mary believes the messenger's news and consents to the miracle of Jesus' birth.

Martin Luther had a very interesting take on the annunciation to Mary. He said there were really three miracles present here. First, there is the miracle that God and humankind would be joined in a child in the first place. That's pretty amazing. Second, there is the miracle that Mary should conceive before she is married. However, neither of those miracles, Luther said, were a big deal for God. The Creator is able to bring about whatever the Creator wants to bring about. The third miracle is that Mary ever consented to this plan, and that's the one with which Luther was most impressed. "Most amazing of all," he says, "is that this maiden should credit the announcement that she, rather than some other virgin, had been chosen as the mother of God."¹

The faith of Mary and Elizabeth is where it all begins for all of us. The angels will eventually sing about peace for the whole Earth, but only because these two women display peace with God. God's kingdom will eventually take up residence within every nation on earth, but only because this lowly, vulnerable soul decides not to let the duty fall to "some other virgin" and first lets God take up residence in her body.

And in spite of the danger this whole condition might put her in, we see more of Mary's faith and foresight in the song she sings after Elizabeth blesses her. It's clear that she is

¹ Roland H. Bainton, *ed.*, *Martin Luther's Christmas Book*, Augsburg, MN, 1948 pp14-15

beginning to understand how far-reaching her decision will be: down the road all generations, not just Elizabeth, will call her blessed, which is something I'm doing this morning.

She sees a world where God has put everything to rights, where the people who are proud and who have everything and who cling to power are removed from everyone's list of role models and those who are humble, weak, and lowly are lifted up as the examples to follow. She sings of a world where the hungry and the needy are satisfied with more than leftovers and where those who have a lot finally learn to live with less. We don't typically think of Mary's Song as a Christmas carol, but in many ways is the first one, and maybe the most essential. And it all begins with her recognition that even her little lowly, easily forgotten, first-century Jewish female soul can magnify the Lord.

Earlier this week I was visiting one of our homebound members with Holy Communion and I had chosen this lesson for us to speak together like the verses of a song. This particular woman suffers from macular degeneration, making it difficult for her to see. Before she could participate with me, she had her husband fetch her magnifying glass from a desk on the other side of the room so she could read the text. There before me was this kind, older woman—maybe like an Elizabeth, warmly welcoming me into her home—a woman too feeble to join in worshipping with the congregation she so loves. And there she was reading Mary's song for me with a magnifying glass, and it drove the point home for me in a fresh new way. That is, when Mary says that her soul can magnify the Lord, it's like she's saying that the almighty Creator of the universe will use her as a magnifying glass so that the whole world can read and understand the gospel, especially those who, for whatever reason, have a hard time seeing that God might love them.

Where would we be without Mary? Where would any of us be without any of God's little magnifying glasses all around—those who have shined with the power of faith in spite of the odds, those who have borne Christ to us and enabled us to read how much God loves us. More often than we'd probably care to admit, it is the faith and belief of the lowly and the humble—the ones we'd least expect, the ordinary, the unspectacular, the rough that surrounds the diamond—which pops up out of nowhere and bowls us over with grace.

It may sound corny, but I've noticed that the truth of Mary's faith and the echoes of her song show up even in almost all of the secular stories and movies of our culture at this time of year. In one after the other, power is spoken and transmitted through the weak and overlooked characters rather than the super-talented or the super-human. None of our favorite Christmas movies never feature people like Superman or Batman or even (dare I say it?) Luke Skywalker. No, it's the likes of Tiny Tim, Cindy-Lou Who, Rudolph, George Bailey from "It's A Wonderful Life"... and even Buddy the Elf who save the day. All of them are just variations of Mary, examples of how in God's plan, it is the meek and marginalized who, despite the odds, become the entry point for grace...who become the voices to help restore justice...who become the unlikely people who speak a new reality into existence. Where would our culture's Christmas be without these little versions of Mary, the magnifier?

Where would the world be without Mary and Elizabeth? Eventually Mary's faith and Elizabeth's blessing draw a straight line to the cross, for this new world where the mighty are brought low and the lowly are lifted up will not fully be brought about until Jesus shows us just how low the Almighty God will go in order to bring us new life. There, on his cross, we witness the most amazing miracle of all: that God's own Son will grow up and then offer himself up for us to remember the promise of mercy. There, on the cross, we will see that God will enter into another, darker and more barren womb in order to draw out new life for all.

Where would any of us be without the faith of others who have borne God's presence for us, who have, through humility and surprise, through calm words or persistent pestering built up our own trust in God and presented us with the joy in believing? Who has helped you remember

the power in faith? Who has been that magnifying glass who's been fetched from the side of the room...who has approached you through the treacherous hill country of Judea...who has unexpectedly allowed you to understand and experience God's grace in Jesus? Because those folks around us even now, more often than we probably care to admit. God sends them all around us all of the time, and most often when we are struggling. Beside a hospital bed. In the recovery house. At the funeral reception.

And they're around us even now, these echoes of Mary, delivering the Lord to us once again. They're here even now, telling us that, in spite of all we see, God's exciting new day has begun and that you—even little you—can proclaim it.

Thanks be to God!

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