

“Singing for Joy In Spite Of”

B, Advent Three; 10:00 am

Luke 1:26-55; December 17, 2017

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

I. WHAT COULD MARY DO?

Imagine, if you will, a young girl, working one day. Where? We're not sure. Out in the field? In the kitchen at home? Tending children, fetching water, on the way to the market?

And a Being appears suddenly before her:

Good morning!

You're beautiful with God's beauty,

Beautiful inside and out!

God be with you.

And Mary, not too surprisingly, is *shaken*. What is behind a greeting like that? What is the meaning of this?

But the angel assured her, “Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.

He will be great,

be called ‘Son of the Highest.’

The Lord God will give him

the throne of his father David;

He will rule Jacob's house forever—
no end, ever, to his kingdom.”

And Mary said unto the angel, “But how?”

For what else was Mary to do? How else *could* she respond? What an odd greeting this was. How unexpected. Perplexing. A little—or a lot!—unnerving! Frightening, even.

“But how? I've never slept with a man.”

³⁵ The angel said unto her,

The Holy Spirit will come upon you,

the power of the Highest hover over you;

Therefore, the child you bring to birth

will be called Holy, Son of God.

II. HOW COULD MARY RESPOND?

Holy, Son of God?! But how?!

And for centuries we have heard this story told, and we have imagined the scene: a meek and mild Mary gracefully folds her hands and bows her head and agrees, accepts, assents:

“As you wish. Let it be with me according to your word.”

And we might just imagine, as centuries of art have portrayed, that this young girl is fair of skin and quiet of character. Demure and delicate.

Author Kathleen Norris and others have pondered: In Western art, why is Mary “almost always presented 'as a

teenage beauty queen, forever eighteen years old...and perfectly manicured"?

“This is an unlikely representation of an actual young girl in Hill Country Judea, capable of long treks and hard, physical labor. An olive-skinned, muscular young woman with calloused hands and feet is far more likely, historically.”

Not so much the “gentle Mary, meek and mild” we hear of so much in song!

For, now, a different vision of Mary starts to emerge. Take that hearty, olive-skinned, full-of chutzpah young woman along for a moment and listen to these words with new ears:

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; **let it be with me** according to your word.”

How about:

“Yo! Gabriel! Messenger of God. What’s up?! Say what?! How is that possible? Oh, it’s a God Thing! Okay! Bring it on! Let’s do it. We’ve been waiting for God to come and do something about all this mess! To bring a mighty hand to help his chosen people. Next time you see the Almighty, ask: “What took you so long?!”

And, in the next episode, look again as the story has played out in our traditional imagination: this young girl accepts this news without much more thought, and skips gaily off to stay with Cousin Elizabeth –once we she started to show she was “in the family way” and people were starting to talk.

And the two of them share their birth stories and sew nice diapers and onesies and other necessary things for the layette. And along the way, they dance and sing a few praise choruses.

Except that’s not *exactly* what happened. For our dear Mary—anything *but* meek and mild—responds with anything *but* a simple “yes, okay, if you say so” to God.

III. WHAT WOULD MARY SING?

Let’s follow that brash young spirit out into the countryside, as she traipses off. Mary not only responds “bring it on” to the angel, and puts the ball in motion to bring a healthy, happy boy into the world in spite of all the external circumstances that would seem to rail against that.

She doesn’t just sing some nice “God must love me” chorus. But she *sings!* She sings one of *the* most subversive, revolutionary hymns ever voiced to the heavens and on earth. And her words echo down through time like no other:

And Mary said,

I’m bursting with God-news;

I’m dancing the song of my Savior God.

God took one good look at me, and look what happened—

I’m the most fortunate woman on earth!

What God has done for me will never be forgotten,

the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.

His mercy flows in wave after wave

on those who are in awe before him.

He bared his arm and showed his strength,
scattered the bluffing braggarts.

He knocked tyrants off their high horses,
pulled victims out of the mud.

The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
the callous rich were left out in the cold.

He embraced his chosen child, Israel;

he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.

It's exactly what he promised,

beginning with Abraham and right up to now.

Mary's song is understood by many to be the epitome of *revolutionary*.

"The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer [sic] recognized the revolutionary nature of Mary's song. Before being executed by the Nazis, Bonhoeffer [sic] spoke these words in a sermon during Advent 1933:

"The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind."

And actually, I learned just this week from one source that this song of Mary, the Magnificat was actually BANNED by *the* governments of Guatemala, India, and Argentina when they feared being overthrown by the populace! The Magnificat's message was considered too empowering to those with nothing to lose because they already know of their true place in God's eternal, loving care.

In a time when words are being banned right before us, these revolutionary words of Mary's are even more fitting and attention-getting! Words are powerful. We see all around us the flipside too: new words are being

created or legitimized, or used against people—in hurtful or harmful ways *as well as* good words being squelched and banned.

Mary's Song, sung on a beautiful, quiet morning in mid-December in a sleepy little mountain town should awaken us, stir inside us that God in Christmas and sending Jesus into the world as a babe, is not all about meek and mild mothers and comforting little nativity scenes with "little Lord Jesus no crying he makes" sleeping peacefully.

IV. WHAT COULD THIS MEAN FOR US?

So. We've seen Mary in a new light. Seen her call and response through the eyes of a strong, resilient, ready-to-ride-with-God young woman. We've seen how a song and the words in it have power that we might not have imagined before.

What does this mean for us?

What would God send an angel to *us* to say, were we something like Mary?

What is God calling you to respond to in the world around you? Where has God found favor with you and seen your chutzpah and courage, and wants to do something with you?

We might not realize what an amazing thing is unfolding here in this story. We might have heard it so many times, pictured it in our minds and played it out in pageants and movies, that we've missed some profound messages that were meant for us too—not just Mary.

V. WHAT WOULD WE CONSENT TO?

We might not realize something else vitally important, too. Luke makes a point of telling us that Mary gave her *consent*. And that God asked for it. How easily God could have just said, “Here’s what I’m going to do, young woman. This is the deal.” But Luke makes sure we know that that’s *not* what happened. That God doesn’t work that way, and that Mary had a vital role to play here. A say. A voice.

That in itself is part of the Good news of great joy that comes at this season in this story. Consider what this means for us. God is a God who seeks consent. Teamwork. God’s plans involve us in their creation. We are not puppets. Not passive nor powerless in what God is up to –with us or with the world.

We’ve heard a lot in the news lately of people in power who are forcing their will upon others who have no ability to give their consent. We do well to take heed from this story in Luke that even the Creator of the Universe would not move forward on the plan with someone who is poor and powerless without her consent. It’s a holy thing!

VI. WHAT COULD GOD BE WANTING TO DO IN US?

What might God be wanting to do with US? What plans for the world might God be cooking up right now? Seeking our ready response. Are we open? Willing? Able to consent?

How do you respond when Christ wants to be born in you.
When God wants to act in YOUR life.....
See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43)

VII. WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?!

Besides willingness and consent, what we learn from Mary is she knew that this wasn’t all going to be a piece of cake. Yet, she said yes.

Rev. Eric Elnes points out “there’s trouble in the gift!”

“Mary knows there’s trouble ahead for her child and for her family. She certainly did not say “yes” to the gift without also saying “yes” to the trouble the gift would bring.

“I think that Mary is also saying “yes” within a context that is particularly hard to respond to. In a sense, what God is proposing has not happened before in the history of the world. In a sense, we could talk about a “virgin birth,” but we can also talk about a “virginal moment” in history. There are no history books you can go back to and say, “It works like this. Here’s what I can expect to happen.” This is brand new territory and she’s saying, “Yes.” Why?”

And, like Mary, we don’t necessarily have to say Yes. To every call, every nudge from God. But that doesn’t mean God will stop trying with us!

It’s like a phone call straight from the Almighty. Straight to our ears. Or, our voicemail, if we’re not answering that day! But that we might *want* to answer, because otherwise we might just miss the gift.

Elnes says: “Every time God comes calling, God comes primarily to offer you a gift. And like any gift, it’s okay to say, “Thanks, but I’d rather not have it.” God does not pressure you when God offers you a gift. I think one of the reasons God does not place pressure on us is that there’s always some trouble that comes with the gift, if you accept it.

Any gift God gives us makes us more visible in the world. The world doesn’t necessarily appreciate our visibility. When we accept God’s gifts, they tend to put us on life’s radar – which means that people see us, including people who may not like

what we're standing for. God's gifts always invite us to put a stake in the ground, of some sort, and stand by it. "

It's a Gift. And it might mean trouble. "Trouble in River City." Trouble when people see us staking out our convictions; taking a stand; declaring right against might. Resisting the return of evil for evil. Protesting when the human rights and dignity of others are being cast down. Speaking truth to power.

Declaring that:

God has shown strength with his arm;

God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ She has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

And, it might be about timing. Our answer might be "not yet." Maybe we're not ready to take on the world right now. Elnes says "Decline" is an option. But that God doesn't stop calling. Stop showing up with messages for us.

"Thus, we can hear God's call and say, "That sounds like a great gift, but I would rather decline this one." Does our response in this way prevent God's will from being done? It prevents God's will from being done *through you*, but our response doesn't prevent God's will being done through someone else who is happy to receive it; who believes that the gift outweighs the trouble it may bring. And what happens to you when you decline the gift? You can be sure that God keeps calling; keeps offering other gifts that help you accomplish both God's will and yours in the world."

I would add that we can also "re-gift" the gifts of God. When the gifts and the calls to action come to us, we might "yes for now" and embark on a path. But then, after a season, pass that banner to someone else, with the guidance and blessing of the Holy Spirit.

And then, look for another angel to appear with a new message, a new song for us. A chance for us to consent to God's "doing a new thing" in us once again. I surmise that the Holy Spirit of God is the ultimate "re-gifter!"

VIII. JOY, JOY, JOY—A CHOICE!

Finally, our fresh look at Mary and what this all means for us, shows us one more thing in a new light: Joy!

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

On this Third Sunday in Advent, we see that joy is not to be found in an absence of trouble, or only in the easy times. Or the quiet nights in the stable with a "sweet little baby Jesus," no crying he makes.

But, that joy is a choice. My spirit rejoices in God my savior, because God has not just left me and all of us alone—to flounder and suffer oppression of many kinds. God is alive and acting in the world, and alive and interacting with *us*. Has found favor with us! Wants to do amazing things in the world with and through us—with our consent.

Joy is a CHOICE.

My spirit rejoices. Even though I know there will be trouble!
Bring it on!

Joy is not based on circumstances, or paled by adverse conditions. We, like Mary, can express great joy "in spite of". "My spirit rejoices"—NOT because everything is hunky dory but because I CHOOSE to rejoice."

“Bring it on!” Amen.

“Mary’s Song” (sung by Rebecca)

My soul exalts the Lord, my God,
and my spirit rejoices in praise to God my Savior.
For he has chosen me, the handmaid of the Lord.
Age to age, generations will call me bless’d

For the favor the Mighty One
has shown to His servant.
For He has honored me,
the bonds slave of the Lord.

In His goodness, His kind compassion,
He sends the Promised One the vow to pay.
In remembrance of His great mercy,
The Holy One has done great things for me, for me.
O magnify His holy name.

My soul magnifies the Lord, my God,
and my heart rejoices in praise to God, my Savior.
For he has chosen me, the bonds slave of the Lord.