

“When Holy Spirit Has a Surprise for Us!”
C, Advent Four; Luke 1:39-55
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Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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I. SURPRISE!!!

What does a surprise from the Divine look like, sound like, feel like?

For Mary, it looked terrifying and wonder-inducing all at once! It looked like *favor!* Upon her lowliness. It looked like food – filling the hungry with good things. It sounded like kept promises of old –hope given to our ancestors now brought to life and to birth in and among *us!*

It felt like *leaping in the womb!* For Mary, for Elizabeth; for all of us who wait in expectant hope! (And no, you don’t have to be female to feel and imagine this!) For God’s promises and presence leap in our “soul womb.”

What does Mary do, when she hears this amazing and awe-inspiring news? She sings! Her soul bursts forth, magnifying this awesome God, even though she doesn’t fully grasp what it all means. She doesn’t need to have a crystal ball. She is given a hymn of praise and prophecy – also a seed planted by the Holy, I wonder?

She is a prophet in song –proclaiming a vision of the world in God’s favor –God’s way of doing things -- a world turned upside down from the power and control and violence and oppression of her time and ours.

And Mary isn’t the only one singing, either. Elizabeth says, “Me too!” And dances and leaps for joy and joins in the song!

What would *your* Magnificat be, if God –via an angelic or any kind of messenger—came to you with “news.” And you weren’t quite sure yet if it was really “news of great *joy*” or maybe “news of great *fear*?!”

When Holy Spirit has a surprise for us, we might respond in any number of ways. We might run and hide. “You got the wrong gal (or guy)! I’m outta here. Not my baby! Not my popstand! We might deny: “Surely not ME!” “Surely not *my* calling, my changed heart, my gifts and service you’re wanting God, right?”

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.

II. MILLIE'S SURPRISE!

One day a “visit with news” came to my mother, Mildred. She awoke one morning in 1963 with “that old familiar feeling.” The following year, on February 20, Baby Becky was born--the final baby in the family.

Mom observed many years later that “God and modern technology played a trick on us” and we all rejoiced. Baby #5 was beautiful, always happy, and a family unifier. She grew up to be the minister her father might have aspired to be had not life taken a different turn!”

It's important to note that the rejoicing didn't happen until later! Like Mother Mary, there was a little “fear and trembling” for Mama Millie with this unexpected news, followed by a little bundle of joy!

Mom wrote about it in her prolific writings of recent years and told the story to her younger brother John, who composed her biography in 2016.

Mother Mildred's “Magnificat” was a little more mundane than Mother Mary's – not quite as concerned with “bringing down the mighty with a prophetic song” as “getting Vacation Bible School off the ground without too much of a hiccup!”

Mom recounts: I went to bed that night confident that all the ‘basics’ for Vacation Bible School were in place: teachers, craft supplies, snacks, etc. And on the home front, my own brood of four, excited and eager.

I awoke that morning in total disbelief. Unbelievably but

unmistakably sick! Morning sick! Child number five was on the way!

I was too sick to lead the opening session of VBS. Frenetic phone calls, reallocation of responsibilities, breakfast for my own brood, and someone to pick them up.

So began the life story of our beautiful, winsome daughter Becky – gifted with big blue eyes, naturally curly hair, a quick mind, and personality plus. Her siblings adored her and would and do just about anything -- change a diaper, fetch a bottle, teach her little tricks and games earlier than most babies would be expected to catch on.

As she grew and her siblings were back in school, I could take her with me just about anywhere. A church meeting? Lay a blanket on the floor with some toys and she would amuse herself, quiet and contentedly, only calling for Mama if she needed to go potty.

Thus she grew, both serious and fun. In high school, she took every music, drama, and public speaking class she could fit in.

In the prelude to Millie's Magnificat is an ethical dilemma. One day a couple years ago, searching for her tax records to give to my brother for filing, I came across *another* story she'd written in later years and now it was *my* turn for a surprise!

This story was called “Birth Control.”

“Still in Seattle and still financially challenged, the babies came regularly, every two years, until there were four.

Now there was something new in the air: birth control! But it was controversial! Was it ethical, was it moral, was it thwarting the ‘will of God’?

We went for it, and George said in his comical but serious way, ‘If God wants us to have any more kids, he’ll have to do it without my help!’

Hence the description of their “Bonus Baby” as “God and modern technology played a trick on us” and (but?) we all rejoiced!”

III. NOT ALONE

What do you do when God surprises you? Do you go and tell? Celebrate, marvel, wonder and worry? Alone? Or together, with others – with family—chosen or blood.

Kate Matthews remind us that we are, right now, in a poignant and pregnant time of waiting – *together*.

“In this Advent season, we’re keenly aware that we wait in community for the promises of God to unfold in our lives. Here, in community, we hold each other up when one of us needs encouragement or support. We help one another search for meaning, rejoice with one another, walk alongside each other.

Just as Elizabeth must have listened to Mary, and helped her prepare for what was to come, we help one another work things out.

Sometimes, we just sit in the dark quiet and wait, together, trusting in the promises of God, listening for a word from the God who speaks to our hearts.”

And Timothy Mulder reflects, "here is a preface for Emmanuel. We humans are not meant to go through the tough or the wonderful alone. Both need to be shared."

IV. LOOK AROUND – NOT ALONE

So, look around! We are not alone – in our surprise—our joys OR our concerns. We are surrounded by Marys and Elizabeths, Zechariahs and Josephs, --they might there be sitting in the pews with us -- awaiting an opportunity to connect more deeply with the people around them. How many of US long to connect our small story with the larger stories of God?"

Who in our church family are the Mary’s – alive with spirit and joy, and a wonderful sense of openness to great adventure? Who are the Elizabeth’s –motherly, wise, listening, understanding, celebrating every step of the journey with us?

Who are the Zechariahs? The excited men –sometimes struck speechless by their response, but sometimes given a song of their own? Who are the Josephs: “Whoa! A baby?! What do I do with *this* news? Okay, God, I’m listening –at least in my dreams!—but you’d better be with us on this road!”

Who do we go to when God surprises us with a vision, a promise, a dream? How can we be Elizabeths and Zechariahs for one another? Angels of comfort and reassurance for the Marys and Josephs who are given surprises they might not know what to do with?!

V. WHEN HOLY SPIRIT HAS A SURPRISE FOR US!

And, vice versa! When Holy Spirit has a surprise for us, can we be like Mary? “Let it be! I know I’m not alone! I’ve got God Herself on my side. Spirit will help me and walk with me and show me the way. Just like my mothers and aunts and church mothers and fathers. I don’t quite know *what* this all means or what the road ahead will bring, but I’m game!

Can we open our hearts and souls up to the seeds planted there by the Holy One, Magnificent is his Name?

"God will not change us as individuals without our participation, and God will not change the world without our participation." (Marcus Borg)

The universe buries strange jewels deep within us all, and then stands back to see if we can find them. (Elizabeth Gilbert)

SEEDS

"Your mind is like a piece of land planted with many different kinds of seeds: seeds of joy, peace, mindfulness, understanding, and love; seeds of craving, anger, fear, hate, and forgetfulness. These wholesome and unwholesome seeds are always there, sleeping in the soil of your mind. The quality of **your life depends on the seeds you water.**

If you plant tomato seeds in your gardens, tomatoes will grow. Just so, if you water a seed of peace in your mind, peace will grow. When the seeds of happiness in you are watered, you will become happy. When the seed of anger in you is watered, you will become angry. The seeds that are watered frequently are those that will grow strong."

~Thich Nhat Hanh

What seeds, what jewels, planted deep within you by the Divine, will you water, tend and allow to grow? When Holy Spirit has a surprise for us, it may be a whole lot like something wanting to give birth; announced by a mysterious messenger, and knock our socks off.

What will you do with this news? To whom will you go and tell?

I'LL GO TELL ELIZABETH—Sung by Rebecca Poos
So many things are happening to me

that I don't understand.
Visions and angels, a baby named Jesus;
it's not what I planned.

Plans I have made are like bird's nests blown down
by the wind and the rain,
and scattered like straw;
I can't quite tell where to find saneness again.

I'll go tell Elizabeth. She'll understand.
I'll go tell Elizabeth. She'll hold my hand;
She'll understand.

Go talk to Joseph;
well, I've talked to Joseph, and Joseph's a man.
So many things a woman can know that a man never can.
Joseph is practical, Joseph is worried by things of his own.
And talking with Joseph
is sometimes no better than being alone. I'll go tell Elizabeth!

So many things are happening to me that I don't understand.
Now that she's pregnant, her life isn't going exactly as planned.
Plans that are made
are like bird's nests blown down by the wind and the rain.
She's scattered like straw,
she can't quite tell where to find saneness again.

So I'm coming Elizabeth.
I'll understand. I'm coming Elizabeth.
I'll hold your hand. I'll understand

CLOSING PRAYER (after song)

O Shepherd of Israel, you gently support the one who is with child and call forth the Lamb who dances in the womb. Stir our hearts to recognize Christ's coming, as Elizabeth recognized his presence in Mary's radiant obedience to your desire, and open our souls to receive the one who came to love your flock. Amen.