

Series: Come, Let Us Adore Him
Sermon: Promises
Scripture: Luke 1:39-55

Third Sunday of Advent
December 15, 2024
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***39** In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, **40** where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. **41** When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit **42** and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. **43** And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? **44** For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. **45** And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." **46** And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, **47** and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, **48** for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; **49** for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. **50** His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. **51** He has shown strength with his arm; he 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** he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. **54** He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, **55** according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

The miracle of Christmas is not lost on any of us; Our all-powerful God is wrapped in flesh and comes to live among us as a tiny infant, left to the mercy of the world. A world that would challenge God's will and God's plan to save us through the love and grace of this precious gift. It is a miracle worth our awe and worship...and it is a miracle that, despite our circumstances, should spark contagious joy within us. Contagions start somewhere...there is a ground zero where the infectious element begins to spread...and Luke helps us find it...right there in the doorway of Elizabeth and Zechariah's home, when two cousins embrace and share a moment of recognition for the role they are playing in God's plan.

What makes this moment particularly beautiful is that the two women can embrace joy, despite the fact that they have, no doubt, been the scandal of their small towns. The gossip train had probably been working overtime with news of Elizabeth, who dared to be with child at her advanced age, and Mary, a young, unmarried, girl who, gossipers probably determined, betrayed her fiancé and carried the proof of her indiscretion in her womb. Their "news of great joy," as the angel proclaims, was not joyous to everyone and I'm sure the words and actions of some had created difficult circumstances for both women. So, maybe that is our second Christmas miracle, that despite these difficult circumstances, both women can still fully recognize the miracle God is achieving through them. It would be easy, for any of us, to downplay God's great work because life around us is hard. It is too easy for us to focus on our problems and the things that hurt us and ignore the beautiful gifts that God has placed in our lives. Yet, here, in the doorway of Elizabeth's home, none of those challenges or problems or hurts or betrayals matter. All that matters is the joy they experience in the moment in which four of God's miracles

embrace...two mothers willing to say yes to God's plan and two sons who will live their lives saying yes as well.

I always imagine Mary as being quiet and contemplative. Her questions for the angel Gabriel are short, and serious. We are told a few times in scripture that she quietly treasures, or ponders, things in her heart. So, when she rushes to Elizabeth's door, and they all hear one another's voice...I wonder...did she feel the first quickening? The first tiny flutters of the savior she carried in her womb?

Elizabeth, further along in her pregnancy, leaves no doubt as to the power of having the four of them together in one room...two faithful servants carrying two future prophets; one who will make way for the other, both making a way for God to be more fully in the world. Elizabeth's baby, who she will name John, leaps for joy in the womb upon hearing Mary's voice. This too might be miracle enough for us at Christmas, to recognize the joy of Jesus' presence, but Mary has more to show us.

I can imagine Mary's timid hand reaching out to Elizabeth's swollen belly, and the two women realizing, in that moment, that their common bond isn't just their pregnancy...it is that they, these two simple, faithful, women, have been invited to be part of God's process of loving and saving the world. These two women carry something of God in them: tiny bodies of hope, peace, joy, and love made tangible and awaiting their first full breaths in the world.

They stand, not only on the literal threshold of Elizabeth's door, but on the spiritual threshold between God's kingdom and our world...the liminal space between divine and human...the space where miracles are born. It is a space that would not exist, were it not for Elizabeth's and Mary's willingness to enter it...embrace it...agree to become a part of it. This one little moment helps us to see that the fulfillment of God's promises is a choice we are offered. God has a plan for carrying out the promised salvation of the world, but that plan is an invitation that comes with human agency to accept or refuse it. In other words, we have the freedom to become a part of what God is doing or to turn away from it.

The Christmas story is joyful and beautiful, but it should not escape us this it is filled with people who are all saying yes to God's invitation to participate in the fulfillment of God's promises. Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, shepherds, and wise men, all stepping into God's work and doing their part. Perhaps that is what makes Christmas even more joyful. That we aren't invited to watch or remember, but that we are invited to participate in its ongoing work of God. We too have role...a place in which we stand at the threshold where God's kingdom touches our world and we make a choice which side we will serve. These two women show us that God's promises aren't just about what is happening TO us, but what is happening THROUGH us, and Mary seems to understand in a profound way. Mary understands that her yes...her willingness to agree to participate in God's work in the world...is a joyful blessing that won't just impact her life, but the lives of others.

Earlier, we sang a hymn based upon Mary's words of recognition that something powerful, is at work in her and through her. This isn't just about her having a baby Messiah, it isn't just about her being chosen and blessed, this is about how God uses such invitations and blessings to be present in the world. "The mighty one has done great things for me," she says...but then she broadens her view to share what great things will also be done for the world: He shows mercy to all, shows strength, scatters the arrogant, pulls down the powerful, lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry, and doesn't let the wealthy demand all the resources. Mary understands these are not just things that happen TO her, they are things that will also happen THROUGH her and her willingness to say to God, "I am the Lord's servant. let it be with me as you say." Mary knows that the promise to bring the nations to God's feet and make them one in peace and justice, is work done through those willing to accept the invitation and live into God's work, and that knowledge spurs great joy.

Perhaps we all feel that joy a bit more strongly at Christmas. Maybe that is why generosity and goodwill are more prevalent, because we have Mary close by to remind us of the importance of being God-bearers in the world...in our communities and families and friendships. Christmas comes with the reminder that we are all called to deliver God's promises into the world, through our willingness to say yes to what God is doing...our willingness to live out the promises God has made...our willingness to say:

- If God promises peace, I will live as an agent of peace.
- If God promises justice, I will live as an agent of justice.
- If God promises mercy, I will live as an agent of mercy.
- If God promises, I will help deliver that promise to the world, through my actions.

It reminds me of a poem Pastor Jim shared with me many years ago, written by Howard Thurman: The Work of Christmas

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.

Are we willing to deliver this work to the world? Are we prepared to be God-bearers in the world? Can we, like Mary, recognize how blessed we are to be invited to participate in God made flesh and living among us?

The joy Mary and Elizabeth felt in saying yes to those questions is infectious... a contagion of joy that will spread from Mary and Elizabeth to the sons they carry, to the fathers of those sons who will raise them...joy that will bounce back and forth between heaven and earth...angel and shepherd...star and wiseman.

Will it spread to us? Will it continue to influence us once the ornaments are packed up and the Christmas Carols are silenced? Mary's praise reminds us that Christmas isn't just a story to enjoy and feel warm fuzzies about...it is an invitation to consider what you are carrying of God inside you. To ask, "What joyous thing is God wanting to deliver through me today?"

Because the truth is, when Jesus grew and stood in the temple and proclaimed, "'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'" He then went out and said, "Follow me." He didn't come to do that work alone, he came to invite us to join him in that work...to carry it, deliver it, find joy in it...joy that spreads to all the nations of the world. Will we say yes to the invitation?

I want to close with prayer that Bishop Ken Carter wrote a few years ago and shared in his blog yesterday...

O God,

We pause, in anticipation of some gift that you want to give to us.

We give thanks for food and friendship, service and song, community and compassion, challenge and calling.

As we pause, we remember Mary, her faith, her trust.

Let us, with Mary, rejoice in You.

Let us, with Mary, acknowledge your greatness.

Let us, with Mary, remember your mercy from generation to generation.

Let us, with Mary, confess that you fill the hungry with good things.

Let us, with Mary, be open to a new birth.

And let us, with Mary, in this busy season, pause to ponder all that this means.

And then let us return to the activities before us, glorifying and praising you for all that we have received. .

In the name of Jesus Christ, your greatest gift to the world, our Savior. Amen.