

C Advent 3 12.16.18

Luke 1:26-56

Focus Statement: God is in our lives and in the world now.

While we at Trinity are still enjoying the treasure trove of amazing Advent music, the rest of the world has gone full on Christmas by now. Their loss really, because Advent songs are so great, but anyway. One of the more modern carols that gets play this time of year is the praise and worship song from the early nineties, "Mary Did You Know." If you haven't heard it, it musically really is a lovely song. Pentatonix has an especially beautiful, haunting and almost aching rendition of it. The music, and of course their harmonies, are gorgeous. But, musicality aside, I'm not a huge fan of the song because friends, Mary totally knew. She knew.

She knew because the angel told her, "you will conceive... and bear a son... [who] will be called Son of the Most High." She knew when she saw her cousin Elizabeth, miraculously also with child. She knew when that same child leapt in Elizabeth's womb, and when Elizabeth proclaimed, "Blessed are you among women... the mother of my Lord."

And not only did Mary know, Mary agreed to it. Mary said yes. Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber says the biggest miracle of the birth of Jesus is not the whole Holy Spirit conception thing, but the fact that the angel found someone willing to take on the project in the first place. Because in first century Palestine, bearing a child out of wedlock was at best an invitation for gossip, and at worst could end in stoning. And let's not be too judgmental on the first century. While stoning's off the table, I can tell you from my own experience, and I'd guess the rest of the women in the room have similar stories, whether a woman, by choice or not

by choice, has or does not have children, many people still feel entitled to have a say in decisions that should belong to oneself, possibly with consultation from one's significant other and/or doctor. But, I digress. The point is, Gabriel showed up and laid this whole pretty much unbelievable scheme out, and after just a few clarifying questions, Mary said yes. Not just yes, but yes with conviction. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Last week we heard Gabriel present a similar promise to Zechariah, though with much lower stakes as Zechariah a) had been praying for a child, b) was married, c) was quite a bit older than Mary, and, maybe most importantly, d) was a dude, and thus not the one getting pregnant. But Zechariah was all, I don't know about this. I'm old, Elizabeth's old, you're a weird messenger from God, "how will I know that this is so?" Mary, on the other hand, with such a bigger task assigned to her, was all in. "Here am I... Lord; let it be with me according to your word." While Zechariah can be a comforting companion for us, reminding us that even those who seem the most faithful, the most devout, the most connected to God, can become comfortable with the status quo and miss the miraculous inbreaking of God among us; Mary is a challenging companion, because Mary gives us a model of what it looks like to take risks in our faith. To respond, "Here I am," when God interrupts our lives to call us to stand up for those in need, to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and advocate on behalf of those whom the rich and powerful have forgotten or silenced or trampled in their reach for the top. To proclaim, "Let it be with me according to your word," when we are given the seemingly impossible task of bringing God's kingdom to earth, of being God's hands, and feet, and heart, and voice in the world.

This is a big, bold statement, to say to God, let your word decide how I live, how I love, how I serve, who I am. Let your hope, your grace, your expectations, define me and not those of the world around me. Let me act with courage and bravery when I am the one in a place to stand up to injustice, to speak for the voiceless, to love God's people. Let me believe the unbelievable, stand up to the undefeatable, risk the impossible, trusting in the promise that nothing is impossible with God. These are big words, and this is a big ask.

But let's be clear, Mary didn't make this statement naively. Mary didn't enter into this project of bearing the Christ child recklessly. Mary knew exactly what she was signing up for, and she did it because she knew who God is. She knew God's power, God's commitment, God's love for God's people and for God's whole creation. Mary knew God, and because she knew God, she had the courage to take this bold step. We know this, because of the song Mary sang at the end of this reading.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed." We who know the two-thousand year arc of Mary's narrative know this to be true, but in the short term Mary demonstrates one of the core truths of what it means to be blessed by God. To be blessed by God does not mean that things will be easy, that we'll get what we want, or that life will be smooth. In fact, more than likely we cannot tell based on how we feel or how our lives seem to be going if we are blessed or not. Because as Mary demonstrates, to be blessed by God means to be in a place where God can use you for God's purpose in the world, where you can be an instrument of

bringing God's saving, loving, grace-filled, hopeful, presence to places and people who so desperately need it. Being blessed by God does not always feel like blessing, as Mary probably experienced as she endured the whispers in her small village as the news spread that she was pregnant, as she worried over her missing twelve-year old son, and as she watched her thirty-three year old son handed over to be crucified. Being blessed by God means believing that God is playing the long game, and that the end of God's story is never the end. It is always life, always hope, always resurrection. That is what Mary knew blessing to be.

The rest of Mary's song speaks of God's redeeming work not as the future, but as something that has already be fulfilled. "He has shown strength... he has scattered the proud... he has brought down the powerful... and lifted up the lowly... he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." He has, he has, he has. Remember, this song was sung while Mary was still pregnant. And barely pregnant at that. This was early yet, like first trimester. But Mary was able to sing this song with conviction because she had the promises of scripture. She knew how God has acted in the past, she had the stories of "those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word," and so she could sing that these things that had not yet happened, will happen. For the child she was bearing, is the one whose impending death has already destroyed death. Because just as God is not bound by space and time, the crucifixion is not bound by space and time. Jesus' death on the cross echoes forward and backward throughout time and space, it is the historical event that changed history, that fulfilled the promises made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants, and to all of God's creation, forever.

Dear friends in Christ, Mary knew. She knew she was carrying the Christ child, she knew the importance of this task, she knew the saving effect it would have, it had already had, on the world. She knew the risk, she knew the challenge, she knew the fear. But she also knew that she was blessed. Not because of who she was, but because of who God is, and because of what God was doing through her. Mary knew, and it gave her the courage to step forward boldly. May we too be filled with such hope and courage. The courage to know that we do not have to be afraid, because God has already acted. Amen.