

Sermon Text: Luke 1:46b-55

Let us pray. Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As I said to the early service this morning, this is the alternative recommended Gospel text for today, an alternative in the lectionary as we preach in a three year cycle through the Bible, and alternative means preacher you need to know if you preach this folks aren't going to like it, but you can do it if you want to. So we're doing this today. Focusing on Mary, but not only Mary, but also a prophetic bit of how the Messiah, who is to come, was to come, who has come in Jesus Christ, was to change everything and to turn things upside down. That is good news for those on the bottom, and often bad news for those on the top.

Let me start first with a story about a young little boy, who had a baby sister born over Christmas break. He went back to school, and his teacher said, “I understand you have a new member of your family.” He said, “Oh yeah, that's right.” The teacher said, “Well, what's the matter, don't you like or aren't you happy to have a brand new baby sister?” He says, “Yeah, I guess, but there are a lot of other things we needed more.”

We needed Mary's child, and we still do. Not everyone knows this. Mary knew this was no ordinary child. Ordinary children are miracles, too, but ordinary children get a paper birth announcement or maybe a man dressed up in a stork costume. Mary got the angel Gabriel. No ordinary baby.

The song that she sang was about turning the whole world upside down. We don't care for it. We rarely talk about it because we have it pretty good as it is. Our self-interest is showing when we avoid Mary's song called “The Magnificat.” His mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud and the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

Yes, Jesus' birth was to be bittersweet. He was coming as Savior, but the world, this world, fights against peace and unity and union with God and with each other at every turn. This world and the people in it don't like to change; don't like to be told that we need to change. That's the way we are. That's part of what sin is. It is something that helps us define other people and other nations and other groups and other races as less.

Jesus came for those who know that we are all among the lesser in the sense that we are less than God intended us to be.

I read yesterday at the YMCA while exercising what I consider a naïve, a touchingly naïve article in “Time” magazine. It was the December 3 issue. You see, science and science history is a lifelong interest of mine, and recently I'm seeing more and more press

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that parallels what they wrote in the magazines back in the 1950s. All the science magazines in the 1950s recklessly announced that soon, very soon, in almost a prophetic voice, technology would be available to turn the deserts into Eden again. Soon, in the '50s in the science magazines, it said there would be no starvation, no epidemics, no more war, because science will save the day. Well, it didn't because science didn't change us. Every technology can be and has been turned into some sort of weapon or another because that is who we are. The article I read in "Time" yesterday is treading the same water, and it says the problem isn't really us per se, it is our brains. It said that morality and right and wrong have nothing to do with religion or theology, that it's all in our brain, and science has not yet figured it out, but it will, and then all will be sweetness and light. I thought to myself, oh my! Oh my! We have been here before.

It reminds me of something my father used to say from his private practice in medicine. He said, "Telling people what is good for them is meaningless because people do what they want to do whether it is good for them or not."

Knowing the right from the wrong, mere knowing the things that make for unity and compassion and peace is also meaningless because people do what they want to do. Though with our minds we may want good things in our lives and our time and our resources, we don't live that way. Jesus came from on high to those who know they are down low. We know what is right, and we know we don't do it. Self-interest runs and ruins our lives. The self-righteous don't think they need a Savior. The powerful don't think they need a Savior. The rich don't think they need a Savior. The full and the healthy and those at peace sometimes even forget to pray for those who suffer with hunger or illness or are under war. We don't even think.

Those on the top don't want the world to change. Those in charge like things just as they are. Mary's song gets lost. It gets ignored in the Christmas rush because it warns that Jesus, no ordinary baby, came to change everything and to turn the world upside down. Even Mary almost gets lost in the Christmas story. Protestants routinely think that Roman Catholics make too much of her, and Roman Catholics routinely think that Protestants don't make enough. There is so much confusion about Mary and about her child.

Now, I'm going to tell you a story that I really like. I told it this morning, and it didn't go over, but I am firmly of the opinion that stories start in the midlines and they sometimes can be very good, but sometimes they can be so bad that they go over to the good side. This story is that bad.

In the second grade, a true story sent to "Reader's Digest," my child's second grade parochial school teacher related the story of the birth of Christ telling part of the narrative each day, and on the fourth day she quizzed the children. What is baby Jesus' mother's name? They all said, "Mary! Mary! Mary!" "Wonderful!" the sister congratulated them. Now, what is baby Jesus' father's name? The room was filled with silence.

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Suddenly, one boy raised his hand, and he said, “I know, Sister! I know! It’s Virg!” The nun said, “Virg?” The little boy said, “Yeah, everybody’s heard of Virg and Mary.”

Okay. What child is this? We have so many of the things wrong. Who is Jesus of Nazareth? Mary tells us in her unsettling song of faith and praise that God was and is keeping his promise of a Savior to put the world in order. What Mary says rings deeply of the Old Testament fulfillment of a Messiah, not Jesus meek and mild, but Jesus triumphant, bringing with him the kingdom of God and justice and righteousness and setting things straight as God intended from the beginning.

Think about the Ten Commandments. All they say is divided neatly among love God and love your neighbor. Jesus expanded on that. Love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself and even love your enemies. Now, that is a superior religious sentiment, and it would lead to world peace if practiced! If practiced! We all fall short of the teaching and intention for humankind, which we all agree is ultimately a good idea. Love God and love your neighbor, even love your enemy. We don’t do it. If God will not make us do it, and science cannot fix our brains, then who will fix this sorry state of affairs? Will it take God’s direct intervention? Yes.

It is fitting that Gabriel appears to Mary. You know Gabriel is Hebrew for God has shown himself to be mighty. Some of you who have done the disciple Bible studies, serious Bible students will remember that Gabriel appears first way back in the Old Testament in the Book of Daniel. Daniel is sort of the Old Testament version of the New Testament Revelation of John. It’s an odd and wonderful book on God’s power to turn things upside down. Well, that first time that Gabriel shows up in Daniel, the message is about hard things that would befall the children of God, about foreigners and wicked kings, who would in the centuries before Christ exploit the poor and oppress the just, and finally, turn the temple in Jerusalem into a place of heathen worship. Gabriel says things will be set right in a future time by God’s direct intervention. God will send a Messiah. So when Gabriel shows up to devout, young Jewish girl Mary, she was thought to be very young, Mary knows. Mary knows that story, and she believes that the time is come, that God is acting, that God is intervening, God is coming to begin to set things right on earth. Mary knew that what was happening to her was earth-shattering.

Mary runs to her cousin Elizabeth, her cousin Elizabeth who was the mother of John the Baptist, and so we’ve got too-old Elizabeth and too-young Mary, both pregnant, and both faithful, but wondering. Wondering out loud just like Abraham’s wife, 90-year-old Sarah, in the Book of Genesis. Sarah wonders out loud, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” That when she recites the song of God’s coming kingdom. God has shown might with his arm, has deposed the mighty from their thrones, and raised the lowly to high places, and to the hungry he has given every good thing while the rich he has sent away empty.

Mary’s proclamation is uncompromisingly clear. Christmas means the shattering of all idolatries. It means the unrelenting resistance to every force or institution that presumes

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to play the role of God. From the Revelation of John, “Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them, and wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Former things will pass away.” Mary was expecting the Son of God, the true light that enlightens everyone.

In this tender conversation with Elizabeth, Luke tells us that she was filled with the Holy Spirit, and filled with the Holy Spirit is Old Testament code word for she was giving a prophetic word. When prophets were filled with the Spirit, they were speaking for God. Old Elizabeth said to young Mary with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” Yes, Mary believed what Gabriel said that she would bear a son and call his name Jesus, and that he would change things forever as the Messiah that Israel was told to expect before.

The very name Jesus, you know, is a newer version of the Old Testament name Joshua that means salvation or God saves. Now, forgetting the details of how this could happen by the Spirit, Mary said, “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your Word.” That was an act of faith. It was an act of trust that we should not ignore or downplay. She said yes to God to bear the Messiah, the Messiah that would bear her sorrow as she watched as the world rejected him all the way to the cross. She said, “My soul magnifies galore.”

What does your soul magnify today? Is it looking forward to a temporary happiness of gift giving and maybe one or two family gatherings or is it the deep joy knowing that God is acting to restore God’s kingdom, God’s vision for creation? Mary may have wondered what she’d gotten herself into with saying yes to God, but she believed God, and that all generations of Israel had thought that God had a plan to bring his kingdom on earth back and to extend it out beyond Judaism into all the peoples of the world.

Genesis starts that way. God had a plan. We rejected God, blamed each other, and God had another plan, to reinstate his vision of what life on earth would look like, his vision of the kingdom of God on earth, and he needed people to believe, people to believe that the creator God can still act, for people to believe that a Messiah would one day come, and things would never be the same. And people to believe that power belongs not just to the rich, but to God, and that worship belongs to God alone. A people to believe that life is more than the accumulation of things, but is to learn to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Who is your neighbor? Those in need. Those created in the image of God. Even your enemies.

Can I really love myself? Yes. God loves you as much as a humble manger birth and a humiliating criminal’s death on a cross, and so you can forgive and love yourself. It is yours for the taking. The Holy Spirit is yours for the asking. You can become a citizen of the kingdom of God and God’s people and a bit of God’s light in the darkness of this world and God’s love in this world. You can ride the tide of God’s word, become God’s

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hands and God’s arms, God’s help in healing as you follow and do as Mary did when she said, behold I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be to me according to your Word. I am yours. I trust you. Use me – my body, my soul, my life – to accomplish your will. That is what Mary was saying, and that is the faith that changes things and lets God in. That is the faith that makes us building blocks in the kingdom of God, and that is scary! Complete surrender is scary! It is scary.

Mary had learned to forget the world’s most common prayer, and that is thy will be changed. Instead, she said the world’s greatest prayer, thy will be done. When Mary surrendered to God in faith and trust, her life was forever changed, and so will ours be when we completely surrender. Saying yes to God means you never know what will happen next.

Bishop Will Willimon, when he was campus pastor, preacher at Duke University, said the following. It’s a little brash, but it’s good. He said, “Any God who would impregnate a poor unmarried woman, then send a messenger to tell her that she is blessed among women will stoop to almost anything! That God would do such a thing seems odd to me yet who am I in my limited imagination to tell God what God should do and should not do in order to get to us?” It is outrageous, isn’t it, the lengths to which God will go to get to us with love.

That’s the Christmas message. In the adventure of saying yes to God, when we accept the gift of Jesus Christ as Savior, we are changed, and we are guided by and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and our lives do become gifts to others as we reflect God’s light into the darkness of this world. That is the way to have true, deep, abiding joy even in the midst of darkness, to give ourselves over to God. Happiness is one thing, but it’s passing. Joy is more like the Hebrew word Shalom. Shalom does mean peace, but it also means enough. It means the hungry will have enough. That everyone will have enough in the things that they need. It means peace. It means love. It means healing. It means wholeness. It means enough. Joy, the joy that we sing about, means that we will have God. We will give ourselves completely to God, and that will be enough. Joy, the deep joy of knowing that God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves, that we are redeemed and forgiven and embraced as God’s children. That is better than any temporary happiness. There is joy in being found by the God, who stoops to save, stoops even to a virgin’s womb, even to a criminal’s cross to restore our heads, our hearts, and our souls, to make us whole, to give us peace.

May you find lasting peace. May you find true joy this Christmas season. Amen.