Sermon Dec. 10, 2023 Advent Year B Westminster Presbyterian Church

Luke 1:1-38, 39-80

“Singing Gloria!”

## Luke 1.26-38

## 26In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”29But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” 34Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” 35The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37For nothing will be impossible with God.” 38Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

**Luke 1.39-80**

39In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

46And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord, 47and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 4

9for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

50His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

51He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 5

2He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

53he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 5

4He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

56And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Singing Gloria!

Today is all about Mary. We have the story of the annunciation, when Mary says “Yes” to being the mother of Jesus, and the Magnificat, that powerful prayer Mary exclaims when visiting her cousin Elizabeth. The Magnificat is Mary’s version (or Luke’s) of the song of Hannah as Hannah dedicated her son, Samuel for God (1 Samuel 2:1-10).

Mary!

Go into any Catholic Church (Roman or Orthodox) and you will find the image of Mary. A painting, an icon, a card with her image and the Magnificat… In the catholic tradition, Mary is venerated, a saint, an icon, a human with heavenly attributes, the Mother of God, the mother of the church, a virgin before during and after Christ’s birth, . On our recent trip to Greece, I visited a home outside of Ephesus, Turkey, where Mary supposedly lived, after Jesus’ death and resurrection. A home where the disciple,” the beloved disciple” John, supposedly brought her, after Jesus charged John to care for her (from the cross). The house is now a place of worship, a chapel, visited by throngs and many who pray to her for healing and drink of the holy water nearby. And then there is the “Hail Mary, full of grace…” prayer on every Catholic’s lips.

Who is Mary?

So what can a lifelong, diehard Protestant have to say about Mary? To me, Mary was the mother of Jesus, plain and simple, The mother who didn’t ask to be a mother, but found herself with child, the mother who lost track of her son in the temple when he was 12 years old, the mother who encouraged Jesus to turn water into wine, the mother whom Jesus kind of said that one should leave their family for the kingdom of God, and the mother who witnessed her son’s agonizing death on the cross. After that, Mary in my upbringing disappears. While I have admired her, it wasn’t in my background to pray to her or to any of the “saints”, as my prayers were always directed to Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit.

So, with apologies to my Catholic friends, I would like to do a little wondering this morning about Mary, the person, not the saint. Perhaps her story has something to say to us about faith and about our own lives as we try to be faithful.

I wonder about that young girl, maybe 15 or 16 years old or younger. We don’t really know how old she was. The life that was laid out for her was a common life. We know that she would marry a man named Joseph, but we don’t know how long into the future that marriage would have taken place. We know that Joseph was a carpenter and the marriage was probably arranged a long time before by both families.. We don’t know anything about Mary’s family. We know that Joseph was descended from David’s lineage, but Mary’s genealogy is not mentioned. Her cousin, Elizabeth is descended from Aaron’s lineage, so it is probably safe to assume that Mary’s ancestor was Aaron. Her marriage to Joseph would officially make Mary a descendent of David, fulfilling the prophecy from Isaiah. Mary would have been brought up in the Jewish faith, but it was the time of the Roman occupation. They were not wealthy and the taxes levied by Rome, were probably a burden. As a girl, Mary would have learned how to care for a household and her family and the future for her would have been well known. A woman of Nazareth, caring for her family and neighbors and being faithful. Did she have dreams beyond Nazareth? I wonder if she even thought of another kind of life. Was she content with the future she could see?

Whatever hopes and dreams Mary had as a young teenager, they probably did not include a visit from Gabriel. Mary may have been deeply religious, even spiritual, and possibly in her dreams felt drawn close to God, but to have God impact her life in such a way…? A sudden appearance and a “Do not be afraid!” If an angel appears to me and says, “Do not be afraid!” I think I would be very afraid. For at that moment it is clear that life is about to change…dramatically! God tapping you on the shoulder has a way of turning one’s life upside down…trust me on this! And if you don’t trust me, just take a look at any of the Old Testament Prophets or Jesus’ disciples and see how their lives turned upside down!

A little over 30 years ago, I was meeting with a friend as prayer partners. I had three lovely daughters at that point and life was good if not hectic. Yet, something was missing. In our prayers, I had an urge to sign up for a course at Colgate Rochester Divinity School. The moment I began, I knew that I had to go further, to go back and take more courses. I told Rich that I had to return and he said I could as if I had a choice. For me it wasn’t a choice! My life took off in another direction and I can’t imagine, now, any other path. As hard as it was the people I’ve met along the way and the times I have been with them have been a blessing. Maybe it wasn’t an angel or a tap on my shoulder, but it was a choice.

Mary has a choice (as we all have a choice). She can turn away and continue with the life she had envisioned, or she can listen to Gabriel and accept his message and her life will never be the same (and the world will change as well). (I think that God was wise in choosing to come to a teenager, someone who still holds onto a promise that life can be more than what is known, someone who is innocent enough to believe) What Mary can’t see is that along with the blessings of a child, she will accept the trials she will face with Joseph, and the potential shame of her community, she will have her heart torn apart as the child she will bear will suffer, and she will never be more in love or prouder of a child born of her womb. Mary says, “Yes!”

In the gospel of Matthew we learn that Joseph planned to “dismiss her quietly” so that she would not be stoned to death, which was the custom for someone accused of adultery. But then God came to Joseph and Joseph married Mary quietly. There does not appear to be much joy in the celebration of this marriage. A pregnant bride and a husband who is a surrogate father, keeping Mary at a distance until after the birth of God’s child, a quiet and rushed wedding, does not seem like a happy celebration. Even with God’s divine plan, known only to Mary and Joseph, joy, celebration, and blessings are held at bay. And I wonder about Mary’s parents…did God talk to them as well?

So when Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, and Elizabeth recognizes the child in Mary’s womb and the promise of her own son, it is no wonder that Mary bursts out in song. For since Gabriel’s visit, life for Mary has probably been harsh. At long last, with Elizabeth, Mary can rejoice, for here is someone who understands her burden and welcomes Mary with love and joy! What a release it must have been for Mary to sing her version of that familiar song. There is no pressure with Elizabeth, this is all about rejoicing in the gift that God has given to both of them. A realization that they are God’s instruments in a divine plan beyond their understanding. With Elizabeth, there are no stares from inquisitive neighbors of Nazareth, no tip toeing around to be a good wife, worthy of Joseph…just being blessed and sharing the joy of life kicking around inside their bodies. With Elizabeth, Mary could bask in the awesome wonder of God’s gift and sing her song of joy! “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”

Mary’s stay with Elizabeth was a blessing as Elizabeth’s time for John to be born approached. And yet, as these two women shared their pregnancies, there would have been times of wonder as they pondered what these two infants would become. Along with the blessing there is a burden for God’s path is not the easy path. These two women in their acceptance of their roles chart a new path for them as they become mothers, but a new world as well.

I wonder what they dreamed for their sons? Could they even have begun to imagine how the world will turn because of their lives? … That the entire world will one day, count the years based on the birth of their sons, that the way they live their lives will change the way, people (even 2000 years in the future) will see God…

When any one of us says, “Yes!” to God, the ripple that begins is only a small piece of what is to come. In the prologue of his novel, Cutting For Stone, Abraham Verghese, has his young protagonist, Marion Stone, ask one of the elders around him, Matron,

*Marion: Why must I do what is hardest?*

*Matron: Because, Marion, you are an instrument of God. Don’t leave the instrument sitting in its case, my son. Play! Leave no part of your instrument unexplored. Why settle for ‘Three Blind Mice’ when you can play the ‘Gloria’?*

*Marion:…. But Matron, I can’t dream of playing Bach’s, ‘Gloria’…,” I said under my breath. I’d never played a string or wind instrument. I couldn’t read music.*

*Matron: “No, Marion, “She said, her gaze soft, reaching for me, her gnarled hands rough on my cheeks, “No, not Bach’s ‘Gloria’. Yours! Your ‘Gloria’ lives within you. The greatest sin is not finding it, ignoring what God made possible in you.”*

(Cutting for Stone, by Abraham Verghese, February 3, 2009, Knopf, NY, NY. p 6-7.)

Mary sings her, “Magnificat”, her Gloria! By, saying Yes, she does not settle for anything less and the possibilities are in God’s hands. So, I wonder, what are the instruments, the possibilities within us, within you, that saying yes can open up to you, to God? What does your Gloria, sound like?

Before you begin to feel like it’s a heavy burden, remember that even the smallest thing we do can have a significant impact. What is needed is that initial step, that yes. Maybe it is a small yes, but if it gives glory to God, it is a step worth taking… The gift that Mary possessed was merely being a woman and the ability to bear a child. By opening up herself to God, her whole life becomes the Magnificat, a Gloria!

However, if all you do is just look at the violin, or let life happen to you without learning all of your abilities, then you will never be able to play, Bach’s Gloria, or know the fullness of your life. All it takes is taking that violin out of the case and beginning to learn all the wonderful (and sometimes not so wonderful) notes and rhythms and allowing the love and joy flow. Likewise this life, this precious life we have been given is one to explore and love. God has created in each of us something so unique and wonderful, who are we to hide that precious gift of our lives. We may never sing a glorious gloria, but the ripples created by living our lives to the fullest potential of God’s love will only enhance the kingdom of God.

That is what Mary allowed, when she said yes!

Kathleen Norris writes:

*When the mystery of God’s love breaks through into my consciousness, do I run from it? Do I ask of it, what it cannot answer? Shrugging, do I retreat into facile cliches, the popular but false wisdom of what “we all know”? Or am I virgin enough to respond from my deepest, truest self, and say something new, a “yes that will change me forever?*

(Watch for the Light, The Plough Publishing House, Farmington PA, 2001, p.53.)

As we age, sometimes we get jaded, a bit skeptical, and stuck in the routines of our lives. This story of Mary asks of us, no demands of us, to shed some of that hardness, to go back to that innocence, and believe what can be. To wonder and look for the possibilities instead of the roadblocks. Only then will we be able to hear the blessings of the angel instead of the do not be afraid. Can we believe that the world will change, that love is possible in a world full of hate, that peace can be, even in a war torn world, and that sometimes a birth of a child is all that is needed.

Last week Larry Bell, talked about bringing the light of hope into the darkness. It is so easy to sink into the depths of despair, with wars, climate crises, hatred and all that is going on in the world today. Times were hard in Mary’s world as well, and yet one young woman dared to believe that the world could turn. One person who listened to God, said yes, and allowed her life to become that Glorious Impossible.

In the depths of despair in our world, God is still at work and we can bring that light of hope, the promise of peace, the celebration of joy, and the glow of love, back into this world if we but listen to the voices of the angels and of God and sing our own Glorias. Maybe the song is tentative at first, but the more we sing it, the louder it will be and the more we may even believe in it.