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Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:39-55

BELIEVING IN THE FULFILLMENT

A number of years ago, in the suburb of Atlanta where the church I served was located, there was a woman who began regularly announcing that she had received a message from Mary, the mother of Jesus. It would come on the 13th of each month. Over time, there were rather large crowds of people coming from near and far to hear from the front porch of this woman's house the monthly communication regarding what Mary had to say to the world. There were no church leaders who sanctioned the authenticity of the monthly statements. And after the messages were shared for a few years, the woman announced there would be no more regular messages coming from Mary. When I was in Georgia, skeptic that I was, I never went to hear the message which was supposed to come from Mary. But today, I invite you to join me in looking for what I would consider to be a more reliable message from Mary, as one I consider to be one of the foremost authorities on the fulfillment of God's promises. In our search, we go to a house in the Judean hill country, as told by Luke's Gospel.

Prior to our reading for today, an angel had come to Mary. This young woman, probably just a teenager, was not a person of means or prominence. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. After being told not to be afraid, young Mary had shockingly been invited by the angel to conceive, carry and deliver the long anticipated Messiah. Since she was still a virgin, she asked about what would be a highly-improbable conception. But while Mary was focused on biological impossibilities, the angel kept talking about theological potentialities. The angel told her that nothing would be impossible with God, and Mary began to say "yes," to her particular role in her service to the Lord.

A fair number of us have entered the pandemonium of parenthood, but what it would be like to be invited to be the mother of the Messiah, none of us can presume to know. We can conjecture that as a young woman who was engaged,

but not yet married, the prospect of becoming a single parent in that culture would carry a very high price. I imagine Mary could anticipate possible rejection by her fiancé and ostracism from her family and faith community. Shame would be heaped upon her by those who did not understand. However, through what was happening through her “yes,” loomed a new possibility that all guilt would be vanquished by the God who was coming into the world.

Months before Mary would eventually journey to Bethlehem, we hear of her journey to the Judean hill country to see her cousin, Elizabeth, who also had no business being pregnant, but was. Elizabeth had long been married to Zechariah, but they had not been able to conceive. Yet somehow, just like an angel had told her husband, Elizabeth had gotten pregnant and would give birth to a son who would later be called John the Baptist. When Mary shows up on their doorstep, the baby within Elizabeth starts acting like he is on a trampoline. The older woman realizes that Mary was expecting not just a baby, a special baby, but also perhaps expecting something of a tongue lashing for getting into this ‘condition.’ Instead, Elizabeth calls Mary, “blessed.” Indeed, she is blessed by the Lord for being able to believe in the fulfillment of what God had promised to her and to all who anticipated the coming of the Messiah.

As much as the universal church may be in disagreement about how to view Mary, the real issue is not so much what we do with her as what God did with and through her. God works within this ordinary teenager and makes her very special. It is that power of transformation that God is about, not just in the life of the mother of the Messiah, but in the life of a world. Mary begins to recognize what God was doing for her and for the world. Listen again to her words as written in a paraphrase of the passage called the Message:

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.¹*

That is a whirlwind of change, not just for her, but for the world. The question is do we let hope or fear rule our hearts when God's presence and calling enters our life and the life of the world? It was in a context of Elizabeth's acceptance and recognition of God's blessing through the fulfillment of what had been promised, that Mary is inspired by hope instead of being inundated by fear. The very hope of the world had taken up residence within her. Mary could begin to see that God had not only done powerful things to her, but had also done great things for her. God was not only great, God was also good, and the praise flows from her spirit and from her mouth.

Visionary Mary sees the prospect of upheaval and downheaval as vast inequities in respect and dignity get addressed, not through the mounting up of the weak in rebellion, but through the very coming of God in the weakness of a poor child. Those who had used a variety of thrones to oppress others would be challenged in their positions by the coming reign of God. Those who had been robbed of their human dignity would be receiving better news than they ever had before.

The story is shared of a young couple who took their newborn baby to see the young mother's elderly grandfather. The older man had suffered a stroke and his ability to communicate had been drastically inhibited. But he knew what was happening. When they placed the infant in his arms, he held it as tenderly as he

had his own children generations before. He caressed the child lovingly and over and over again said the only word he could: “Yes, yes, yes, yes.”²

In the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, God too is saying, “Yes, yes, yes, yes.” It is God’s ‘yes’ to the deepest hopes for humanity, ‘yes’ to using unlikely candidates even like us to carry out divine initiatives, ‘yes’ to our hunger for fulfillment of God’s great promises, and ‘yes’ to good news that transforms that which was thought to be unchangeable. Can God give birth to that kind of hope within our lives? Listen to Mary - the answer according to her is yes!

¹ Eugene Peterson, The Message, NavPress, 2001.

² From a story in a sermon by William Quick, found at http://day1.org/753-the_word_became_flesh