

The Burden of a Promise Kept

The Second Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers."

This is one of the great songs in the Bible. It comes in an action-packed first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. It starts with a priest named Zechariah, going through the motions of leading a worship service in the temple. The angel of the Lord appears to him—right there in the temple—and tells him he's going to be a father. He seems surprised, and the angel gets peeved and makes him mute until the baby is born—never say that God doesn't know exactly how to get our attention.

After Zechariah the angel visits a girl who must have been about 15 years old or so.

He tells her that God has noticed her faithfulness, and that he has a job for her. She's going to be the mother of the Messiah God had promised to his covenant people—everything they had hoped for over centuries was going to get started right there in her body.

Her reaction is priceless. She may have been a 15 year old in the 1st century, but she knew how things worked. She said to the angel: 'How can this be, since I'm a virgin?' I can imagine the angel smiling and thinking that God had picked someone with just the right amount of chutzpah for the job. He says to her: 'don't worry—we'll take care of that part.'

Then Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, one of her relatives, who happens to be the pregnant wife of Zechariah the Silent Preacher. They swap their amazing, miraculous stories, and then Elizabeth gives Mary this word from God: 'Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!'

By the time we get to our text, Mary knows not only that the promises God made to his covenant people are going to come true, but that she is going to play a starring role.

How do you think you would respond to that?

This is one of the classic readings for the Advent season, but it's always stuck out to me as strange. Mary comes off sounding unreal, un-human—like a saint. She sounds like a heavenly being instead of like a teenage girl who just got the shock of her life.

Over this Advent season I've been rethinking this passage. I posed a question in Facebook the other day that went like this: 'John D'Elia is rethinking Mary's Song in Luke 1:46-55. Is she rejoicing or terrified?' You wouldn't believe the reaction.

People leaned one way or the other. Some caught where I was going with it and talked about how terrified she must have been. Others defended her sort of other-worldly courage—the traditional view of her. Lots of people rode the fence and said it was equal parts of both (every four years when the press talks about swing voters or undecideds, that's who they're talking about). Some of the moms said

fairly strongly that no man could ever understand this passage.

Any conclusion we come to about how Mary felt has to include the fear she must have experienced when the angel Gabriel told her what was in store for her. At the very least it would be a scandal for a young girl to be pregnant in a hyper-traditional, rules-based culture. At the very least she had to be afraid of that. The rest of the story, if it turned out to be true, would have been even more overwhelming.

The point here isn't to tear down our image of Mary—to make her seem weak or pathetic. Let's remember here that God *chose* her, and that we don't believe God uses us like puppets. She must have had some strength, some powerful faith, some special qualities that God could call for this special task of special tasks.

When I talk about the sheer terror Mary must have felt, it's as an introduction to our text this morning—it's a way of creating context for this amazing song we read every Advent season.

Mary knew the promises of God—she was a part of a community that existed in constant waiting for the Messiah to appear—she lived her life faithfully, day by day, struggling to be a reflection of the God she believed in. In her own way, as a young woman who lived in a culture that didn't give much weight to the opinions or hopes of young women, Mary lived at the very core of the Jewish faith tradition.

She knew God's promises and believed that he would make good on each and every one of them. She just never thought she was the one God would choose to use in fulfilling those promises. It's one thing to believe God will do what he promised to do, it's another to find out you're playing the lead in the show.

But this shouldn't surprise us as we think back on other stories in the Bible. God had a habit of calling people who didn't feel ready to do the job he had for them, and they didn't always respond so well.

God sends an angel to Jacob and Jacob picks a fight with him—wrestles with him all night.

Moses, probably the most important character in the entire Old Testament—the one God chose to lead his people out of bondage in Egypt, and the one God used to communicate the 10 Commandments to the Hebrews—when God called Moses do you remember what he said? ‘Please God, not me, I wouldn’t be very good at this at all. I know—you can send my brother Aaron—he seems like a smart guy.’

Even Jesus—and I know this might be shocking to say—even Jesus, when he was waiting to be arrested at the end of his earthly life—*even Jesus* asked if there was a Plan B. He prayed: ‘Father, if you’re willing, take this cup from me.’

When Mary finally absorbs what God has in mind for her, she doesn’t wrestle with God like Jacob did. She doesn’t try to weasel out of it like Moses did. She doesn’t even ask for the cup to go to someone else.

Mary praises God. Mary sees herself in the plan that God has for her people and the world. Mary remembers who she is and whose she is and says to God: ‘Let’s get on with it.’

But here’s the follow up question to Mary’s willingness to serve: Let’s get on with what? What was the Messiah supposed to do?

The Messiah came to reconcile us to God himself. To begin the process of bringing God’s peace and justice to every part of his creation. The Messiah came to show that God loved his people more than they could ever imagine. The Messiah came to keep God’s promises.

Richard Mouw, the president of Fuller Seminary, tells the story of shopping in a local mall one Christmas Eve. He was walking through a department store, hearing ‘the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight’ playing on the shop sound system. He looked all around at the people scrambling for gifts they couldn’t pay for—trying to buy happiness that wasn’t for sale, and asked himself: Are the hopes and fears of all these people really met—fully satisfied—in the Christ Child tonight?

Mary believed they would be. She knew the promises and trusted the one who made them. When it came time for her to play her part in the plan God had for his

creation, she might have been terrified, but she stepped into the ring and trusted that God was in control.

There's a lesson for us here as we prepare for Christmas—as we get into this season of remembering how to expect the Messiah in each of our lives. Mary's story might be unique, but it plays out in different ways in each one of our lives.

God has promises on the table, and he has a part for each of us in bringing those promises to life here, now, in this place and in places we may never even know about.

God has a call on each one of our lives, and there isn't a single thing about that call that's dependent on us feeling ready—on us feeling able or competent. The deal isn't sealed when we get enough training or pray enough or read the entire Bible. The deal is sealed when we respond like this teenage girl who just realized her life was about to change forever.

We begin to understand the Christmas story when we get past our own fear. When we hear God's call and respond by saying:

'My soul magnifies the Lord and my soul rejoices in God my savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.'

In modern English that prayer might sound like this:

Praise God! I might be scared out of my mind, but I'm going to trust the God who saves me, the one who doesn't care about the things I've done in my past—who isn't keeping an impossible list of requirements—who isn't lurking around waiting to drop a hammer on me when I make a mistake. ---

So what does that teach us about how we can respond when God calls us to faith and service?

We can learn a few things from a teenage girl in a backwater town in an occupied country.

Just like Mary, our response has three parts:

First, we praise God as the maker and keeper of promises.

Next, we see ourselves in the plan that God has for his people and his world.

And finally, we remember who we are and whose we are and we say to God: 'Let's get on with it.'

God has promises on the table. God has promises made and promises fulfilled on this Table. When Jesus asked for the cup to pass him by he also said, in the same breath, 'yet not my will, but yours be done.' He took that cup, and now he passes it on to us.

If you're ever wondering what in the world God wants from you—if you're ever struggling to know how you should respond to God when he calls your name, it can be reduced to that single sentence that Jesus said to his Father, and that we say each week in the Lord's Prayer.

Not my will, but yours be done.

As we come to Communion during this Advent season, we remember the way a young girl responded to God's call on her life, and the way her son did the same. We remember the sacrifice that brought us all to this place today, and the promise that Christ will return to finish what he started.

As we come to the Table, ask God to show you something new this Christmas season. Tell him you're ready to play your part in his plan. Then be prepared to say the most important sentence you can ever say in your lifetime:

Not my will, Lord, but yours be done.

Come to the Table.