

## Waiting For and Expecting the Light

Luke 1:39-56

December 12, 2021 *Advent series – Watching for the Light*

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*Within a few days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why am I so favored, that the mother of the Messiah should come to me? The moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed what our God said to her would be accomplished." that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

*And Mary said,*

*"My soul proclaims your greatness, O God  
and my spirit rejoices in you my Savior.*

*For you have looked with favor upon your lowly servant and from this day forward  
all generations will call me blessed.*

*For you, the Holy One, have done great things for me, and holy is your name.*

*Your mercy reaches from age to age for those who are in awe of you.*

*You have shown strength with your arm;*

*You have scattered the proud in their conceit;*

*You have deposed might from their thrones, and raised the lowly to high places.*

*You have filled the hungry with good things, while you have sent the rich away empty.*

*You have come to the aid of Israel your servant, mindful of your mercy*

*the promise you made to our ancestors,*

*to Sarah and Abraham and their descendants forever."*

*And Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months and then returned home.*

*The Inclusive Bible version*

Where are you from? Who are your people? In the United States? Another country?

It is still a conversation some of us may have when we meet someone new or start coming to the church. Although we live in a transient world and many of us have moved numerous times, I do like to hear stories about where people grew up or felt at home or have roots.

One of the roles of prophets in the Bible was to give people hope that their future leader or king. In the book of Micah, chapter 5, we read this: "From you, O Bethlehem, shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient of days!"

When Micah's audience would have first heard this prophecy, they didn't know about Jesus. They were likely in exile or just unpacking their suitcases on their return from exile, so the idea

of a powerful and useful ruler coming from little Bethlehem would have seemed far-fetched. And probably not very inspiring. We don't even want to hear such prophecies today. We want our leaders to come from Big Places and have Big Influence.

What if your prophecy today said, "From you, O San Rafael, shall come forth one who is to rule..." or "From you, O Novato, shall come forth the great leader you have been waiting for.."

Nothing against San Rafael, this a lovely place. But it doesn't really inspire Big Things. It is just a town, where people like you and I live.

But, while we are looking to San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, or to the Statehouse in Sacramento, Micah was desperately trying to get people to refocus attention in another direction. He wants us to look for someone who will stand in God's strength rather than in their own strength, or the strength of weapons, wealth, or influence. This is Good News because this leader will feed their flock. The people will be secure. The Leader, the anointed one, shall be the one of peace.

From little Bethlehem, the one camel town.

There is no indication that the people who heard Micah's prophecy paid it much mind. "Yeah, Micah. We'll see about that. Bethlehem! Ha! And, while we're making crazy predictions, that this leader will be born to an unwed teenager too. That Micah is a funny guy!"

But that is, of course, exactly how God works. Again, and again, and again, God confounds our understanding for how things should be, for how the story is supposed to play out.

It is worth remembering. Because even now, 2,000 years later, we still seem to be surprised that the son of God would be in a place where families kept their animals to a teenage mother and not born in the halls of power. We still seem to live as if nothing good could come from little Bethlehem, or San Rafael, for that matter. We still live as if the Divine story is not going to intersect in our little corner of the world. Are we watching for the light? Expecting it?

The author of Luke's gospel seemed to have believed the prophet Micah. He recognized the leader who would "be the one of peace" in the person of Jesus. And he tells us the story to make sure we see the connections too and see the light and good news from little Bethlehem.

For Luke, the birth of Jesus is both mundane and every day as a teenager in Nowhereville giving birth and also cosmic, earth shattering, game changing as the power of God defeating the powers of this world. (1)

But Mary doesn't know this quite yet. Remember last week, we read the passage just before this one, the story of the Annunciation when Mary got some big news. The angel has appeared and told her not to be afraid. She's going to give birth to the son of God.

The angel doesn't give her the details about how this will all work out, but does tell her that nothing is impossible with God. Which is great, really.

But I wonder what Mary was thinking after the angel left.  
How can I tell my parents? How can I tell my fiancé?  
What are people going to say? Why didn't the angel appear to them?

So this unmarried pregnant teenager leaves town. With haste.

And heads to visit her distant cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth is one of our many barren women in scripture. She is gifted with a late life pregnancy and the child in her womb will be a great prophet. John the baptizer.

It seems that the best place for a pregnant teenager to take stock of her situation is with a woman it thought she was beyond any child bearing. Mary needed to go to her to appreciate an unplanned pregnancy.

Have you had news like that? I imagine you haven't had a visit from the angel Gabriel, but have you received news made you stop and really take stock of your situation? I remember a few times in my life when I circumstances were hard and I needed a good friend for support, to help me process and take stock. Once was when the new church Jeffrey and I helped start in the Pocono Mountains was closing. So much amazing ministry and mission had happened, but it was not sustainable. We did not have a new call in place. It felt like wilderness time. We moved to MD for a few months while we waited and prayed and networked and hoped. My friend Maggi was also between calls as a pastor. We talked regularly on the phone. The empathy, the grief, the unknowns, the reassurance, the shared prayers. When her call came, it was to Old First Pres. in SF. So happy for her. And then after 6 months, I was called to New Jersey. It was the right call at the right time. We often talk about that as Mary & Elizabeth time as we waited and expected and hope for a new chapter of life and ministry to be born.

Mary and Elizabeth, giving each other particular gifts that nobody else could give. Mary's visit must have given comfort to a woman who had been in seclusion. And Elizabeth's child leapt within her womb and she gave Mary a blessing—blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. They were expecting, expectant. What an amazing way to live – waiting for and expecting light, transformation, Divine Mystery.

Think how powerful that blessing would have seemed to Mary—to have the message of the angel confirmed by a real person she knew and could trust.

Between the two of them, Elizabeth and Mary, bearers of both the Messenger and the Message, they were able to support each other in ways that other people could not.

Mary's reply, Mary's gift, to Elizabeth's blessing is a prayer, a hymn, a poem of thanksgiving, promise and justice. And it isn't just a gift for Elizabeth, or just a prayer for Mary. This is a prayer for all of creation—from generation to generation. Mary seems to live into the cosmic nature of her reality.

“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!”

She goes on to describe the great things that God has done for her.

God has shown strength, scattered the proud.

brought the powerful down from their thrones.

God has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things.

We know that the proud have not yet been scattered. The powerful are still on their thrones. The lowly are still low and the hungry have not yet been filled. But Mary puts her prophecy in present tense, not future tense. Maybe because she sees the future becoming the present in the reality that God has chosen her to bear God's own son, the Messiah. Mary's song proclaims the very reality and promise that she embodies.

We as a church work to make Mary's song real. Sing it with her

- Write letters about protecting God's creation and look for ways to be green
- Write letters through Bread for the World to advocate for food & ending hunger
- Teach and encourage and lift up children, many who live in the Canal area, through after school program
- Generous gifts – Christmas gifts for underserved children for families who do not have enough money for the basics, let alone toys
- Alternative Gift Fair – a way to lift up organizations who are lifting up people around the world and our community

I look forward to conversations in new year about who the church is now and how we continue to live into Mary's song, how we help nurture friendships like Mary and Elizabeth, Joseph and other men who were watching Jesus speak truth to power.

As we move toward Christmas, may Mary's song be a reminder to us that the reality that was inaugurated in a birth of child laid in a manger next to the animals in Nowhereville, Judea is still in process. We are called to sing her song and to live our lives showing we believe it to be true. If God would choose to be born to a teenage mother in the backwater of Judea, what more might God have in store for us? May the Advent, the Coming, of the Holy One turn our lives and our world upside down so that Mary's song may be true for all. Amen.