

Advent 2: More Peace
Angels Among Us: Do not be Afraid
Dec 4th, 2022

Threshold Moment

Last week we heard the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth being visited by an angelic messenger. Zechariah was so shocked by the unexpected that he lost the power of speech and had to contemplate his families new beginning in silence. We experienced the quiet and holiness of contemplation with prayer stations. Giving us the opportunity to slow down, quiet our minds and prepare for this divine mystery that awaits us.

The week we will hear of a winged messenger bringing Mary a message of new beginning. We will hear about her confusion and her fear. *Why would such an incredible message come to a common girl just barely a woman?* Then we will hear her reply to the messenger "Here I am." For nothing is impossible with God.

Scripture Reading

Luke 1:26-56

REFLECTION

Mary and Elizabeth. Elizabeth and Mary. These are two strong and capable women and their stories are deeply interwoven, but because we generally read them out of order we can miss the pattern the write of Luke weaves for us. The proper order of these stories is as follows.

Chapter 1 begins with Zechariah in the temple and his visit with the angel. Then we meet Elizabeth old and barren, but miraculously pregnant.

Meanwhile, *meanwhile* the angel Gabriel visits Mary, as we heard today. Then Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, the babe John jumps in her womb and Mary sings her praise to God.

Then we read of the Birth of John and Zechariah speaks again.

Then we read about the Birth of Jesus.

When we hear the first chapter of Luke in order, we get the sense that these two families are deeply connected. Often, we jump to focusing on Jesus and John. But let's stay focused on the mothers today. The women who make the whole story possible.

It's fascinating to me that throughout all the gospel narratives it's the women who are first. First to learn the Messiah is coming, first to recognize Jesus in a crowd, first to understand what the disciples miss, first to anoint Jesus, first to kneel at the foot of the

cross, first to see him Easter morning. This is most apparent in the gospels of Luke and John. Joseph gets barely a mention in Luke, we must look to Matthew for that side of the story and in John women are regularly the ones who understand and know Jesus first, while many of the men remain confused.

Yet, despite (or perhaps because) of them being the first, they have been marginalized, or trivialized to the point that we ignore them. Or they're placed on such insurmountable pedestals they seem God like, beyond reproach and they become impossible to relate to.

And somehow, over the centuries the Church has managed to make Mary both. She's a virgin and the mother of God. She's humble and divine. She's poor and perfect. She's an impossible to reach standard, yet vulnerable and gentle.

She makes me think of the words I've heard recently about women who are expected to work as if they don't have children to raise and raise their children as if they don't work.

Impossible standards and insurmountable pedestals.

Then there's Elizabeth, blamed and ashamed for her barren status, with no consideration what her husband's contribution to this situation might be.

So here we have two women meeting to share the most unexpected and unimaginable news. Both are going to have babies. An old barren woman and a young, poor, unwed woman.

We hear in the beginning of this passage that Mary, upon meeting the angel and hearing his words, is perplexed. She really can't understand why she's been chosen by God for this miraculous event. She says, "How can this be?" in a vernacular of our time this young teenage girl might have said, "You're joking, right?" or "Seriously?" or "wait, What?"

Mary experiences imposter syndrome. She's nothing special. In fact, she's nothing at all. She's poor, unwed, under-educated and she's about to become an unwed pregnant teenager. She is all the things her society looks down on, and she's also all the things our society looks down on. I know this to be true, as an unwed pregnant 24-year-old, people looked down their noses at me on occasion.

Gabriel addresses all of this, telling her that God has found favor in her and that nothing is impossible with God. A lot of theologians over the centuries has declared that it is her 'virginal status, her innate purity' that made God choose her. That she was somehow untouched by the cynicism and sin of the world.

And for us to find similar favor with God, we need to be the same. Impossible standards and insurmountable pedestals. I really doubt this to be true of Mary, perhaps she was an innocent and sheltered girl, or perhaps she wasn't. I honestly don't think it matters.

I could spend the next few minutes explaining the translation arguments surrounding the word virgin, and in the original Greek the word can be translated to young women and has no bearing on her sexual status. But when we get caught up in the literal, we miss the more important metaphors present in this story.

Thomas Merton, an American Trappist monk and mystic described seeking '*point vierge*' during his contemplative prayer practices. A virgin point at the center of his being, "*untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God.*"

Poet Joy Cowley says, "*we have within us a virgin place, a holy space which belongs to God alone... the space which will not be touched by the people we love or the things we gather or the positions we hold... an eternal space that exists for Truth, where the love of God overcomes us, where the life of God fills us...*"

Mary experiences this *point vierge* when the angel explains to her, 'that the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.' The place within Mary's soul, which is for God alone is touched

Joy Cowley's poem says, "*...where the life of God fills us, the Emmanuel space where we conceive and become pregnant of the Holy One and day by day we give birth to Christ in the world.*"

When we step away from the literal, we notice that the angel never actually says conception of this child won't happen in the natural way of things, just that this baby will be connected to and overshadowed by God.

When Mary visits Elizabeth, we hear that her baby jumped for joy in her womb. Perhaps that jump, that leap of understanding occurred within Elizabeth's own *point vierge*, the place where she understood the pure truth of what was happening to of them

The insurmountable pedestal Mary has been placed on, becomes a little more attainable when we consider this lens. At least it is too me. I too seek that place within my soul, or my heart that remains true and connected to God. A place that is warm and bright because it belongs to God alone and doesn't get all messy because of my messy and imperfect life. Gabriel says, 'nothing is impossible with God,' I know that in spite of all my imperfections, my cynicism, it will remain warm and bright because of God's presence there.

Mary also accepts this and says, 'here I am.' Echoing the voices of a multitude of prophets who have gone before her.

And if continue to tug on this metaphor a little more something true remarkable happens. Mary's *point vierge*, Mary's point of pure truth becomes incarnate in the world. There is a Holy Inbreaking of God into human history and God becomes flesh and

because of the life death and resurrection of God in human form continues, God continues to break-into the world.

If we find that place within us, the virgin space that is where the life of God fills us then day by day we to, give birth to Christ in the world.

Like Mary, Elizabeth seems an unlikely person to be chosen by God. She is old and barren. In her society this would be a shameful thing. She, like Mary would have lived on the margins of her community, despite the status of her husband, and her own status as a descendant of Aaron.

Like Mary, Elizabeth is chosen. Elizabeth has found favor by God. The passage from last week focuses on Zechariah yes, but Elizabeth's status is stated very clearly so we know that like Mary is nothing special.

Neither of these women have redeeming qualities based on the society within which they live. And this is where that pattern I mentioned begins to emerge.

Elizabeth is nothing special. Mary is nothing special. In the next chapter Jesus will be born nowhere special and the very first people who hear the news of his birth are nothing special. They're shepherds, worth less than the sheep they care for.

Luke is desperate for us to understand that everything about the way Jesus entered the world is nothing special at all. And that is what makes it miraculous. Jesus is the polar opposite of what the world understands society to be. We hear this in Mary's prophecy – God will scatter the proud, bring down the lowly, send the rich away empty. The lowly will be lifted up, the hungry filled with good things. She refers to herself as a lowly servant, who will be remembered as blessed.

It is her lowly status and Elizabeth's lowly status that God favors. They are imperfect human beings and by equating them with impossible standards and placing them on insurmountable pedestals completely misses the point.

We are imperfect human beings and we often hold ourselves to impossible standards and strive for insurmountable pedestals and it is hard. It is exhausting. So what if we just stop? What if we take a moment and look for our own *point vierge*? That point where our authentic being sparks, warm and bright with God. The point where the power of the Most High is interwoven within us and we know we are favored by God, because nothing is impossible with God. And we know we are chosen by God, not because we are perfect, but because we just are.

May it be so,
Amen