“God’s Unfolding Story”

Luke 1:39-56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of this servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is God’s name.
God’s mercy is for those who fear the Lord
from generation to generation.
God has shown strength with an arm;
God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
God has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
God has helped God’s servant Israel,
in remembrance of divine mercy,
according to the promise God made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.
It’s a poignant moment, the encounter between these two women, Mary and Elizabeth, both pregnant in unexpected, unusual, unlikely fashions. But immediately before the passage Bruce just read to us, there is another famous scene from the story of Jesus’ birth.

That scene is the one where the angel Gabriel shows up to announce to Mary that she would become pregnant, and that the child she would bear would be the Son of God. As you can imagine, the Annunciation is a story with particular resonance for me this year… Nowadays, of course, people discover they are pregnant in a variety of different ways, but angelic proclamation is not usually one of them. When Matt and I found out about our pregnancy, it was a lot less dramatic than all that—and a lot more joyful, and a lot more socially acceptable, because for Mary, her pregnancy was anything but good news.

The first words Gabriel spoke to Mary were, “Do not be afraid,” which suggests to me that there certainly was reason to fear. Not only had this angel, this divine messenger, this unknown stranger shown up unannounced in her house, but the news he brought to Mary was anything but cause for joyous celebration.

Mary lived in a world where to be pregnant out of wedlock could lead to being stoned, or disowned, or consigned to a life of poverty or prostitution. An unaccounted-for pregnancy could leave a woman homeless, friendless, without family and without recourse. So no matter what Gabriel said to Mary about having found favor with God, this pregnancy would not win Mary any earthly favor whatsoever.

If you remember the story of the Annunciation, you’ll know that Mary asked Gabriel a question when he had delivered his news. The text says she was perplexed by Gabriel’s words (which I think is the understatement of the millennium). “How can this be?” she inquired. And when she had received an explanation—which probably seemed as improbable to her as it does to some of you—she was satisfied, and she gave her willing consent to all that was to come. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord,” she said. “Let it be with me according to your word.”

I imagine Mary squaring her shoulders and holding her head high as she gave her answer, strong in the face of this startling development and courageous as she took her place in God’s unfolding story of salvation. But later, after Gabriel had departed from her and gone back to heaven, or on to deliver his next announcement to another unsuspecting mortal, I think Mary probably had one of those moments—you know the kind—one of those moments where you pinch yourself and think, What the heck just happened? What on earth have I gotten myself into? What in God’s name am I going to do now?

But the deed was done; the Yes had been said. She couldn’t very well change her mind, and even if she did, how would she track Gabriel down and tell him she had revised her answer? So with doubts swirling around her and fears nipping at her heels, Mary set out for the house of her relative, Elizabeth, in the Judean hill country near Jerusalem.

Elizabeth was also pregnant, as Gabriel had just informed Mary, and her pregnancy was also unconventional. Where Mary was still unwed, Elizabeth had been married without children for decades. Where Mary was considered too young, Elizabeth was considered far too old. But
nevertheless, somehow, both Elizabeth and Mary were bearing sons about whom weighty things had been prophesied.

In time-honored tradition, Mary turned to her older kinswoman, who was further along than she was, for some helpful advice and perspective on this new pregnancy. And in time-honored tradition, Elizabeth took Mary in. She did not scorn her or shame her for her “situation.” Instead, she affirmed her, and blessed her, and helped her to remember the sure certainty and bold courage she had felt when she said Yes to Gabriel, Yes to God. In the face of those swirling doubts and nipping fears, in the face of What the heck just happened? and What in God’s name am I going to do now? Elizabeth helped Mary to see again her place in God’s unfolding story of salvation.

And then, buttressed by Elizabeth’s affirmation, renewed by Elizabeth’s confidence, Mary was able to sing one of the most beautiful songs in scripture. We call it the Magnificat, after its first word when rendered in Latin. We sang one setting of it as our first hymn today, and we will sing another at the end of the service. It is a gorgeous piece of poetry, reminiscent of other songs sung by brave women in scripture. And it is also a potent cry of justice, a prophetic glimpse of the world as God intends it to be.

Did you notice that many of the verbs in the song are in the past tense, or, more precisely, the perfect tense? They are presented as completed actions—God has done great things, God has shown strength, God has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly, God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. Mary’s song is a song of fulfillment, a song that proclaims with certainty the goodness and power of God.

If you know anything about the world at Mary’s time—or if you know anything about the world at our time—then you’ll appreciate that these actions she mentions are hardly a done deal. There is quite a bit more lifting up and bringing down, quite a bit more filling up and showing strength, quite a bit more life-changing and justice-making to be done before the world comes to resemble God’s realm. But Mary sang prophetically, powerfully, joyfully, for she knew that she was part of this unfolding story that would come to its fulfillment as surely and as inexorably as water wears away stone.

As you look at the world around us… as you hear more and more bad news every time you turn on the television or tune in the radio or open the newspaper or pull out your phone… as you look at your own life and face the hardships and sorrows you may be enduring in this season… it may be hard to imagine how you, too, could sing of God’s justice made real, God’s mercy made manifest. And yet, both in scripture and in secular culture, sometimes the most beautiful, most powerful songs are sung by people in the midst of trouble, pain, struggle, and suffering.

And so I wonder: if you are feeling weary in these dark midwinter days, to whom might you turn for the kind of affirmation and encouragement Elizabeth offered to Mary? If you are feeling low and lost and lonely, who might help you to see again your place in God’s unfolding story of salvation? Even in the absence of what we might call happiness, even when you’ve
received news that is hard to call good, who can help you access the deep, bold joy of Mary, the joy of the Magnificat? Maybe you don’t have an older kinswoman in your family to whom you can turn. But if you look around this room, I promise you that there is someone here in this church family who has felt what you are feeling, someone who would take you in, and affirm you, and offer you their blessing.

And, conversely: if you are feeling full of confident hope in these days, to whom might you offer safe harbor and a comforting embrace? If you are feeling clear and bold and powerful, whose hand might you take to lift them from the mud and the mire? If you are filled with happiness, if your ears are ringing with good news, how will you also access the deep, prophetic joy of Mary, the joy of the Magnificat? Maybe there is not someone in your family who needs this from you right now. But if you look around this room, I promise you that there is someone here in this church family who is wondering What on earth have I gotten myself into?, someone who needs the affirmation and blessing you can provide.

Because here’s the thing. The world needs the song that dwells within each one of you. The world needs the prayer that you alone can pray. The world needs the glimpse of God that you alone can see. Even, or especially, in the face of so many swirling shadows, the world needs your potent, prophetic joy. God needs your soul’s Magnificat. Because it is only with all of our voices, all of our prayers, all of our songs, all of our visions, all of our prophecies, all of our souls united in the service of God’s justice and joy, that what Mary proclaimed will come true at last.

If that sounds like an unfolding story you’d like to be part of, then say Amen.