

## “Ordinary People, Unexpected Prophets”

December 21, 2014

*Christ Comes* series – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent

Today we hear Mary sing her song of joy and justice after Elizabeth proclaims that Mary is the mother of her Lord. When you look up the word “joy,” the definition is: a vivid emotion of pleasure or extreme gladness. Extreme gladness.

My personal connection came when I was pregnant with Ana in late 2003. I was a part of a Gospel choir in Muskegon where we sang a version of Mary’s song - known as the Magnificat. These words in Luke stand in the same tradition as Miriam’s song of victory in Exodus 15 after the Israelites cross the Red Sea and Hannah’s song in First Samuel when she praises God for the birth of her son, Samuel, after she has waited for a child.

For me, that experience of singing Mary’s song in a Gospel choir was life-changing because I encountered Mary in a whole new way. She wasn’t the meek and mild virgin mother of Jesus. She was a prophet who sang of God’s greatness, believed in God’s goodness, and challenged the social order. This song was about the world being turned upside-down, and if I took it to heart, then I had to look at my relationship with Jesus differently.

We encounter Mary and Elizabeth – two women God used whose faith changed the course of history. These two pregnant women become the prophets of the day - Elizabeth, who is supposed to be too old to conceive a child and now carries John, and Mary, young and not yet married. By all accounts, neither one of them is anything special. But then God has never been about looking for “special” according to our standards.

For the past three weeks, Isaiah has been our focus. His service as a prophet before and during the time that the Israelites were in exile in Babylon and after they returned to Jerusalem put him in the place of sharing both judgment and hope with God’s people. In the midst of impossible situations, Isaiah offered the promise of something good from God.

And remember how we described a prophet’s work: someone who speaks for God, someone who spots the gap between what we believe and how we behave and drives God’s Word in between, someone who tells the truth. Perhaps we think of just those prophets in the Old Testament – before Jesus’ time. But what about Mary? She is just as much a prophet who speaks of what God will do through the child she carries. She is touched by the Holy Spirit and proclaims the work of God – even when it seems like the most impossible thing in the whole world!

Mary's song offers hope for the people. After Elizabeth encourages her, Mary breaks out in praise to God. She sings a song of hope, to be sure, but also a song that reminds us of the justice of God. We don't spend a lot of energy looking at her or what she says or does when she's given the news of Jesus. For us, she's the meek and mild virgin girl who got God's message and went along with it. She's the one kneeling at the manger looking at the Christ child. But there's nothing meek and mild about her reaction to God's promise of Jesus. She is full of joy because of it. And the song she sings is potent and powerful.

The story is told of a tourist to the Holy Land who bought a ceramic nativity set in Bethlehem. As he prepared to leave to board his flight to return to the United States, the security guard asked him to unpack the box. He pulled out the figures of the wise men, the shepherds, Mary, Joseph and the baby. The security guard said, "I'm very sorry, but I have to check each of these individually through the X-ray." The tourist asked, "Why? It's a ceramic nativity set, after all!" To which the security guard replied, "But, these figures could contain explosives." And you know what? He was right!

Mary's song is about God who knows the poor and lowly, the vulnerable, the helpless, the lost. God who knows them intimately – and chooses to lift them up. God who knows the struggles – and promises to bring justice. God who knows the pain – and promises relief. God who knows the score – and gives the assurance that judgment will come. God knows the deadness – and brings life. Mary is a prophet who tells the Good News of God.

And Mary and her song still challenge us. Mary's song still surprises me. Somehow I keep thinking that God is more concerned with the mighty on their thrones, the ones who have money and power and prestige, the movers and the shakers of our world, the rich and famous. I still struggle to believe that what she says is true because it just seems like it can't be right. You mean all of this striving for stuff and status isn't what it's about? You mean God's work is to scatter the proud, bring down those who put their hope in power, lift up those who are "lowly?" You mean that I should pay attention to the people I usually don't pay any attention to?

Friends, I know it's the week of Christmas. I know there's a lot to do. I know your list is long. But I invite us to let Mary break into the bustle of this week. Listen to her and hear what she says about the life inside of her. She's just been told that she'll bear a son. She's not married. She's dirt poor. There are plenty of things wrong in her life – plenty of things to worry about. But she prays. She has nothing left to lean on but God alone. She trusts in God to bring about what has been promised from the beginning. The child she bears will do all the great things she sings about. Jesus shows mercy, fights against pride, loves those called "unlovable," and feeds the hungry.

Mary offers God's powerful word as a prophet - not one we'd expect - but a word about how God is at work in Jesus. This matters. It matters more than the lists and the shopping and the parties. Mary is a prophet who offers herself to God. And that's the powerful part. We have the same opportunity - to accept God's call on our lives and respond with trust and hope. Will we be used? Will we say yes?

Dorothy Sayers, a British writer of a generation ago, rebuked the church with some stinging words. She said, "You have the greatest good news on earth – the incarnation of God in human life – and you treat it as an insignificant news item fit for page 14 of the chronicle of daily events!"

How do we treat the good news that Mary sang about? Jesus' ministry on earth is just a fraction of what he's still doing today in the places and times when people choose to read Mary's words and take them as God's plan for the world. We face justice issues every day. But what about practicing justice – not selective justice – but justice as Mary sings about? For anyone who has ever felt small or insignificant, Mary reminds us that God is at work in the ordinary to do the extraordinary.

Mary sings about Jesus' birth as a total reversal. He will do great things. What hope and expectation! She's certain of God's presence, of God's mercy, of God's power. Martin Luther said that the greatest miracle of Christmas is that Mary believed.

Mary praises God because of what God has done for her and because of what God is doing through her. She carries the One who brings salvation for the world. She is blessed among women. But her first response isn't to dwell on herself, but magnify God. When we empty ourselves, we magnify God. She believed in God's word to her, and she trusts in God to be Savior. She isn't the Savior. God is the One who saves. She is God's servant and seeks to do God's will.

Mary's song prods us to consider God's call on our lives. If you and I have ever felt small or insignificant, Mary reminds us that God is at work in the ordinary to do the extraordinary. Mary participates in God's great work. She is a part of the Incarnation - of God coming to us "in the flesh." Mary's faith in God's power challenges us. We can believe that God will do great things – even in our midst. And we have to talk about the great things God is doing now!

Mary is a model for us who want to be serious disciples. She is the one who will bear the Savior. She is the bringer of the news that God's reign has broken into the world. Mary's song confronts our image of God - not as One who blesses those who seem to be doing well, but One who stands on the side of those who struggle. Not the One who calls people with the best résumé, but the One who calls us to believe that we

can be more than what we think we are. Not the One who calls us to trust in wealth and power, but the One who calls us to trust in him alone for life.

The prophets were ones who spoke God's values and vision to the people. And still God's vision is before us in Mary's song. Maybe we wouldn't get so distracted if we went about being thankful and praying like Mary. How would it be if we woke up in the morning and said, "My soul rejoices in the Lord."

Maybe if we said aloud more often just what it is that God does for us, we'd see it around us more clearly! How would it be if we said to someone "God has done great things for me" and actually shared what they are! Maybe if we focused on being good witnesses and doing works of service – lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things – we'd understand just how radical Mary's song is!

Friends, we have great Good News to share. It's news that has the power to change hearts toward good, bring hope where there's none, drive despair away, and offer healing for the wounds that are so deep among us all. I pray that we would share that great Good News this week – and far beyond this season.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.