

“Believing in God’s Possibilities”
Luke 1:26-38
Sunday, December 24, 2017
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

It is said that... “Men are strangely quiet in Luke's first chapter. Zechariah is silenced. Joseph says nothing at all. What is the gospel writer up to here? In the hush, our gaze is drawn toward two women-cousins who rush to greet each other, females with wombs filled by miraculous cavorting babies, and spirits set afire by the living God. Pure hysteria. I imagine that Plato would have cringed at the rampant emotionalism of it all. And it's just getting started... after the raucous reunion, after the cousins bump their rounded tummies, the women start to prophesy. They start to talk about how the world ought to be. They make claims about what God wants of us. Their talk is full of typical irrational stuff: you know, tyrants being thrown down; hungry people getting food. They protest social inequalities. They speak of a new order.” (Scott Black Johnston).

Mary’s actions in this story are radical. Elizabeth’s, too. Mary believes, against all odds, in God’s possibilities.

I. Fear.

Mary is our example on this fourth Sunday of Advent, this Christmas Eve. She is a role model for how to respond to God’s message of possibility.

Mary’s first response is fear, doubt and questioning. Of course, a visitation from an angel of God is a frightening thing in itself. Additionally, for a woman to be pregnant without a husband in first century Palestine is a death sentence. You and I know how the story ends;

Joseph decides not to have her stoned to death. But Mary doesn't know that part of the story yet. And even if she's confident that Joseph won't have her put to death, she still has trepidation over the whole "Mother of God" thing. "How can this be?" she asks. Gabriel whispers in her ear, "You will conceive and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be called the Son of the Most High." Mary has got to be thinking: "Gabriel, you took a wrong turn somewhere! You obviously got the wrong girl! I'm a Jew in a society ruled by Roman soldiers. I'm poor and powerless – a powerless woman in a culture dominated by men. Big, Roman men -- with swords!"

And yet Mary responds with faith. She trusts in the promises and the possibilities of God. She finds hope in God.

William Barclay once said that the world's most popular prayer is, "Thy will be changed." But the world's greatest prayer is, "Thy will be done." Mary prayed the latter. She responded to the angel Gabriel, saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (v. 38). She was ready to receive the questionable "blessing" of being an unwed mother in a cruel time, in a cruel place, surrounded by cruelty.

We join our voices with Mary and ask, "How can this be?" Faced with the ugliness and the horror that humans inflict on one another – especially on innocent children – how can God's promises be fulfilled? How can God whisper possibilities of hope in our ears, given the hopelessness we witness all around us? There is hopelessness, not just in brutal countries far away, but in our own neighborhoods, where people die and people hurt one another and people suffer in personal ways that may not make the news at FOX or CNN or the BBC. But hope is often absent, nevertheless.

Barclay comments: "God does not choose a person for ease and comfort and selfish joy

but for a task that will take all that head and heart and hand can bring to it. God chooses a man in order to use him.” It has also been said that, “Jesus Christ came not to make life easy but to make men great.”

Mary is our example this morning, our role model. Mary praises God in the midst of severe hardship. You and I know that her pain will only increase as she witnesses her son taking on a dangerous, radical ministry, as she watches him on the road to suffering and death. And yet she sings a song of joy when she visits her cousin, Elizabeth, to share Gabriel’s news:

“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.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever” (Luke 1:46-55).

II. Active participation.

Mary not only receives God’s message with joy. Mary agrees to participate in God’s plan for her; in God’s plan for the world. She agrees to actively participate.

There’s a story about a professor who sat at his desk one evening working on the next

day's lectures. His housekeeper had laid that day's mail and papers at his desk and he began to shuffle through them, tossing most in the wastebasket. He then noticed a magazine, which was not even addressed to him but delivered to his office by mistake. It fell open to an article entitled "The Needs of the Congo Mission."

Casually he began to read, when he was suddenly consumed by these words: "The need is great here. We have no one to work the northern province of Gabon in the central Congo. And it is my prayer as I write this article that God will lay His hand on one -- one on whom, already, the Master's eyes have been cast -- that he or she shall be called to this place to help us."

Professor Albert Schweitzer closed the magazine and wrote in his diary: "My search is over." He gave himself to the Congo. (source: Brett Blair)

Like Mary, Albert Schweitzer was ready when God's message came to him. A magazine that wasn't even his showed up in his mailbox. He noticed the title, read the article, and responded with joy and action. Like Mary, he can't change the whole world single-handedly. But he can respond to the assignment God has laid before him. So can you and I. We can actively participate in the possibilities God lays before us.

I have a friend who uses the phrase, "taking action on my own behalf." So often we are too afraid, or too stuck in a rut, or too beaten down by the world to take action -- on our own behalf or on behalf of others. In response to God's message, Albert Schweitzer takes action on behalf of the people of the Congo. In response to Gabriel's message from God, Mary takes action on behalf of all the people of the world, down through the ages.

Can you hear God whispering in your ear this Christmas? Are you ready to respond with joy and action?

III. What possibilities might God’s messengers be whispering in your ear this season?

Chuck Swindoll writes that, “surprises come in many forms and guises: some good, some borderline amazing, some awful, some tragic, some hilarious. But there's one thing we can usually say -- surprises aren't boring.”

Mary was surprised by God’s message to her.

Are you ready to be surprised by God this season? Certainly there are the joyous surprises of the holiday – gatherings with friends and family; gifts exchanged; children wide-eyed with wonder; twinkling Christmas lights; reindeer and elves and Santa with his sleigh.

Are you ready to be surprised by God this Christmas? How will the baby Jesus arrive in your life this year? Will you respond with joy? Will you agree to actively participate in the unwrapping of the surprise He has for you?

“If there is a heresy today,” writes Peter Buehler, “it is that we're so preoccupied with other things that we fail to pay attention to the fact of God's spectacular grace at work in and through our humanity, God's miraculous unmerited love in evidence around us. God's Son born to bring us Second Birth while we labor under the assumption that we have to do it all ourselves.”

There is a works righteousness danger that particularly plagues Americans. We’re all about pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, and independently going where no one has gone before, and exploring new places and new ideas and new possibilities. We can do it ourselves! We stamp our little feet. Who needs God?! We are fully capable of managing our own affairs, thank you very much.

The truth is, God has wild new possibilities in mind for each one of us sitting here this morning. We may think we’re in charge of our own lives, but we have no idea what God has in

store. Because God is miraculous and wondrous and filled with creative possibilities that we can't begin to imagine.

So today we can look to our sister, Mary, and get some ideas. We can learn from her that it's OK to be afraid. It's OK to have doubts and questions. And we can learn from her that God's possibilities are, in fact...possible!! We can celebrate God's possibilities with songs of joy. God is at work doing amazing things in His Son, Jesus. Praise God!

We can also be ready to get active, to participate, to cooperate with God in His amazing, surprising, awesome gifts for us and for the world. We don't have to do it all ourselves, but we can take action filled with hope, knowing that God is at work among us.

Closing.

Frederick Buechner is poetic in his writings about Mary, from Gabriel's perspective:

“She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. “You mustn't be afraid, Mary,” he said. And as he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.”

The angels tremble that God entrusts to you and to me portions of His kingdom plan. This Christmas, may you hear God's message whispered in your ear. May you respond with joy. And may you be empowered to take action – on your own behalf and on behalf of the world.

Amen.