

Hopkins South Monterey

United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

December 18, 2022

Pastor Kelsey

Luke 1:39-58 NRSV

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,
40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

46 And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.

Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,

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

50 indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;

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

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

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

54 He has come to the aid of his child Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

56 And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

Prayers & Sermon

*God of all,
we are a mixed bag of
distracted and forlorn,
eager and anxious.
We hope that you might
move through the obstacle course
we build up
around our hearts—
made out of questions and defenses—
and douse us in good news.
For at the end of the day,
all we want is to know that we are not alone,
that you are always near.
So knock on our door,
Sweet talk the guard dog we place in front of our
vulnerable hearts,
and come right in.
Make yourself at home.
Pull us close and tell us your story of
unbelievable good news.
We are listening.
We are grateful.
Amen.*

Here we are, one step away from Christmas! And one step further in the Christmas story. This week, we come back to Mary and get a chance to hear a bit more from and about her. Our scripture this week tells us of Mary's visit to Elizabeth and gives us a glimpse into Mary's mind as she shares her Magnificat song.

I heard from some last week that you appreciated spending some time getting to know a bit more about Joseph and the realities that he and Mary faced, so before we look at what Mary did and said, let's get to know her a little better!

Mary is from a small town similar to us! It is estimated that Nazareth was a town of around 1,600 people. That puts Nazareth between the population of the town of Hopkins and Hopkins Township. From what we know as community members of Hopkins, it means it was likely that everyone knew everyone and the family trees could connect almost everyone in town. We often picture the holy family as this small family of three, but at the time it was the norm to live with an extended family unit in a compound

of houses that shared outdoor kitchen space and animal care. We know that Mary was part of the peasant class which survived by making a living through agriculture and trades, like carpentry, which we know both Joseph and Jesus did. Beyond making enough to keep their family afloat, the peasants in Galilee were also burdened with three tax payments: one to Rome, one to King Herod, and one to the temple which tradition asked for 10% of their harvest. They didn't make much, and much of what they made went to those taxes, so there was little extra to go around. As a woman in the family unit, Mary was responsible for her part of domestic chores, likely keeping her busy for 10 hours a day. She likely helped with carrying water from a communal source, gathering wood, cooking, and washing. Now, a reminder that Mary was likely quite young at this point in her journey. It was typical at the time for women to be married around 13 years old. That is young, but in that time, she wasn't just some little, fragile girl. We know from the whole of her story that she walked the hill country of Judea while pregnant, she gives birth in a stable, she made a yearly 4-5 day journey with the pilgrimage to Jerusalem with her family, she was used to sleeping in the open country and among it all, she did daily hard labor at home. So, she was fit, she was capable, and she was quite the tough cookie! Another aspect to acknowledge as we read her famous song today, is to remember that, as a woman, it is very unlikely that she knew how to read or write. But the culture was really good at sharing things orally: reading scriptures, telling stories, reciting poems and singing songs.

So, it is no surprise that Mary shares her hopes and beliefs as a song. The Magnificat, Mary's song, is Mary's way of telling us through the ages her trust in God, who she believes God is and what she values. And what a song it is! It is not one of the familiar elements to the Christmas story for many of us. Her song is rarely mentioned in the storybook tellings of her journey. This song is gritty and radical. It has inspired many who are in a similar place to where Mary was to keep going through adversity and seek justice with the hope that our God is one who can turn the world on its head. The famous German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis for his beliefs, said this in an Advent sermon in 1933 about Mary's song:

"The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is that passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind."

It is important that we remember who Mary is when we read or hear her song. Especially because as Bonhoeffer shared, we most often think about her as the lovely saint virgin Mary. But when she was alive, when she was becoming the mother of Jesus, she epitomized the lowly of Israel. She was one of the marginalized for whom God was her only hope. The real, lived experience of Mary was one with poverty, oppression, violence, and deadly consequences for disturbing the status quo. Naturally, her faith is rooted in her lived experience. She recognizes that in the world and before our all powerful God she is simply a "maidservant." But she strongly believes that nothing is impossible for God. She sings a song that declares God rescues life from

death, joy from sorrow, laughing from crying. She lived with little means, but she sings her praises to God with confidence and hopes for a world turned upside down by God, dethroning the powerful and lifting the lowly. These powerful words from this lowly young woman have resonated through the generations, empowering and inspiring many as they call for justice. Mary's testament of faith and values has inspired many to hold onto our God as a God of love and justice, who brings the last to first and the first last; who humbles the exalted and exalts the humbled; who turns mourning into rejoicing; who casts down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. We see God better through the song and faith of Mary.

As we see God through Mary, Mary saw God in those she surrounded herself with. It makes sense that Mary declares this radical song from her visit with Elizabeth. She declares this song of great faith and belief after seeing God in Elizabeth. She had been told by the Angel Gabriel that she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit and the proof God makes this happen is in her cousin, Elizabeth who is already 6 months pregnant. Mary receives this back to back breaking news and immediately heads to visit Elizabeth. This was no quick journey, by the way! We know Mary was from Nazareth in Galilee, we are told Elizabeth lives in a Judean town in the hill country. Those who have a better idea of ancient geography than me have deduced that it was likely she lived somewhere outside of Jerusalem. Which means Mary had around a 100 mile journey to get to Elizabeth. Now yeah, today, that would mean about a 2 hour car ride, not great, but doable for a day trip if needed. But back then? That meant a 4-5 day journey along roadways that were known to be dangerous and were mostly heading uphill. This was no run down the street or a casual trip a town over! Mary would have had to make arrangements with a caravan already making the journey, or Joseph, as her betrothed, would have had to take time off of his work and contributions to the household to chaperone her there, and then go back home. No wonder she made it an extended stay! No matter the trouble it was to make it happen, it was important to Mary to go be with the person who could understand her situation the best and to lend her own support however she could. Mary arrives at Elizabeth's house, perhaps unannounced, with some big news of her own to share. I imagine at this point Mary had received a lot of reactions to her pregnancy announcement. Joseph almost left her, surely it was only a short time before everyone in town heard about it and had their own opinion about her situation. She was pregnant when she was supposed to still be a virgin. Many probably doubted her. Those who supported her were probably still shocked and worried about what this meant for Mary. I imagine she had few fully positive reactions to her announcement. Yet, here she shows up at Elizabeth's door and the first thing Elizabeth shares with her is her child leaping in her womb, being filled with the holy spirit, and exclaiming a blessing and joy at her visit. What a relief that had to be. Elizabeth doesn't only get it, but she celebrates how she sees God at work. Any fear or misgivings Mary still had at this point was met with the overwhelming praise and courage of Elizabeth. These two women, Mary and Elizabeth, who had experienced the divine in unexpected and holy ways unique to the two of them, get to be together and see the divine in one another. These two women with divinely miraculous pregnancy can ground themselves in the solidarity and support they can give each other. In sharing their experience, in seeing God in each other, they can see God in themselves. And it is in that profound connection, in this safe place of solidarity, in this beautiful moment of seeing God in

each other, Mary sings her hymn of praise, declaring how God's liberating love remains steadfast throughout the ages.

Mary and Elizabeth give us an example of the power of relationship and the power of finding God in each other. Mary greets Elizabeth at both a literal and figurative threshold. They meet in the doorway of Elizabeth's home and come together as Mary and Elizabeth face a new chapter in their lives that will change everything. Mary and Elizabeth make up part of the generations that have seen God in each other. They are an example to us of the power of looking for God in each other and looking for God at work in our relationships. The way we see God in each other can have a profound impact on how we live, how we treat each other, and how we understand God. Who has been the Elizabeth to your Mary or the Mary to your Elizabeth? Who were the people who greeted you and supported you through a threshold moment—a time of great change? Or who were the people you ran to when crap hit the fan? Who has been there for you when everything fell apart? Who has helped you through a hard time? Perhaps you saw God in them in that moment, perhaps you weren't actively looking for God in that moment, but came to see God in them in hindsight. Perhaps you've never thought to look for God in those who come beside you in life beyond giving thanks for them being put in your path.

Elizabeth and Mary's exciting interaction with a baby leaping in the womb and a grand song being sung for the ages reminds us how we can see God in each other and reminds us to be looking for God in each other. Not just around each other or in ourselves. But to look for God IN each other. Mary and Elizabeth learned first hand that our God is one who does not look at our worldly status but is merciful and lifts up the lowly. God does not value what the world values, but values the heart and faith. In each other, Mary and Elizabeth could see those that God trusted and gifted with the honor of great mercy and blessings. If we look for God IN each other, what can we learn from each other? If we look for God IN each other, how could that change our view of every human being—not just those that we expect to see God in, but those we would never expect God to shine through? If we look for God IN each other, how could our world be turned upside down like Mary hopes for and God calls for? And how can we better let "God in us" shine for others to see? Well, perhaps Mary and Elizabeth also give us an answer for that. They came together, they spent time together and supported each other through a strange chapter in life. If we are going to be someone that someone else can see God in, then we have to be with others. It means paying attention for when someone else is going through a hard time and showing up for them. It means reaching out to those you know understand your situation for their support when you need it. It means being a community together. When we are among each other, oh how many ways we can see God. May we go out looking for God in each other and may we celebrate when we do.

Where I Saw God Last by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

The dimple in your right cheek,
the child playing peek-a-boo from his stroller,
the abuelita who spends her afternoons
in the park by 86th; the teenagers on the subway

who cannot control their laughter; Neil, my neighbor,
who always asks about you, the mother who whispers
a dozen times a day, "thank you, Jesus, thank you, Jesus, thank you, Jesus"; the
saxophone player at
42nd street, the poets,
the artists, the garden volunteers; the metro car driver
who sticks his head out the window to make sure we're all aboard; the man who gave
up his seat on
the subway, the kid in the
dinosaur pajamas who cannot be convinced they're not
school attire; the teachers, the nurses, the taxi cab drivers;
the woman at the end of the block with her yappy dogs and her
books in the window, the lovers that lay sprawled out on park blankets,
the runners, the daydreamers, the sidewalk chalk artists;
John from upstairs whose favorite flowers are yellow tulips, the Persian man at the
grocery who tells
me to be safe when I leave,
my grandmother in Georgia; my neighbor, the stranger; thank you, Jesus, thank you,
Jesus, thank you,
Jesus.

call to confession

*One of the greatest gifts and challenges of faith is that we cannot be Christian alone.
We need one another.
We need one another to grow.
We need one another to love.
And we need one another to see God more clearly.
So together, let us lift our voices in unison.
Let us lean into the ties that bind and pray to our merciful God.*

prayer of confession

*God of today and tomorrow,
When Mary was pregnant and afraid, she ran to her cousin Elizabeth's house.
Elizabeth threw open the door with joy and showered blessings upon her.
How often do we have that same opportunity?
How often do we leave the door locked, the curtains drawn, and the lights off?
How often do we shower critique or judgment instead of blessings and joy?
Gracious God, forgive us for our wrongs. We want to see you when we see our
neighbor. Amen.*

words of forgiveness

*Friends, this is what I know—
God delights in us.
God throws open the door, just like Elizabeth, and says,
"Come on home. There is room for you here!"
And in that moment, we are blessed.*

*In that moment, we are forgiven.
In that moment, we are seen, healed, and welcomed home.
So rest in this good news: you are saved by grace.
Let us respond together, using the words from Mary's song:
"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."
(Luke 1:46:55 NRSV)*