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Sermon 29 Nov 2020: The Angel and The Virgin

Today is the first day of the advent season; it is the first of the four Sundays of Advent. Advent marks the beginning of a new church year, and in addition to being the first day of the advent season, today is also the end of what's known as "ordinary time" in the church calendar. In fact, it's the end of the second season, the longest season of ordinary time – and it certainly feels like it's been the longest season but not one I would consider ordinary by any means. Course, Ordinary time is called "ordinary" not because it's common but because the weeks are numbered. Ordinary stems from the Latin word "*ordo*" – as in "order" – so the numbered weeks in the church calendar represent the ordered life of the church – those days, like most of the days of our lives that are ordinary – no births, deaths, anniversaries – just regular days filled with regular things like work or school, or worry, anxiety, or hope, or love.

When this season of "ordinary time" began, after Easter, we had no idea how absolutely extra-ordinary it would be. We knew there was a virus but we didn't really know how it would affect us. We didn't know how long we'd have to wait to see our family and friends. We didn't know if or when this virus would go away. We didn't know if there would be a vaccine. Things have been unclear for what seems like a really long time. And folks from all walks of faith have been praying for something to happen – something that would save us from this virus.

But when Pfizer announced the vaccine, we knew the date it would be approved, what the efficacy is, that it would take two doses, that it would need to be kept at -70 C, specifics. And although we must continue to be patient, to hold fast, to wear masks, wash hands, socially distance, follow the rules, keep the numbers under control, we have a clear hope – we are waiting with assurance, no longer wondering. Waiting with the knowledge that this virus will be defeated and that someday very soon we'll be able to hug each other, to sing and worship, to be together again.

Throughout the Old Testament we read the words of Prophets waiting for the Messiah to come, Prophets who knew that the Messiah would come. That he would be of the line of David. That he would be a sufferer for his people. That his coming would mark the beginning of the day of the Lord, the creation of the kingdom of God. That things would change when he got here. But what they didn't know was when

this was going to happen and who the messiah was going to be. Who his family would be – who his parents were going to be. They didn't know the specifics. They had some general ideas but no solid specifics.

Our scripture this morning begins with Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, visiting Mary and telling her that she is favoured by God, blessed among women and that she's going to have a baby that will be the savior of the world. And Gabriel, through Luke's gospel, shares the specifics of the long awaited Messiah's arrival. And after a long, long wait, the poems and songs of the Old Testament prophets are clarified as the details of the birth story in Luke unfolds. The appearance of Gabriel and Mary's proclamation change things from waiting with hope and assurance but without the specifics to waiting with hope and assurance with specific knowledge of who the Messiah is and where and when he will arrive.

But, we're not just looking at Gabriel's announcement. This scene is not a soliloquy, it's a dialogue between an angel and a virgin. Gabriel has something to say to Mary and to all of us. But it doesn't stop there, Luke gives us the details of Mary's response to Gabriel.

Now, often when angels appear to people, those people are afraid and rightly so. Angels are described in scary ways in the bible. Many of them have multiple sets of wings and eyes. Some are larger than life. Others have multiple faces that appear like a man from one angle, and a lion, ox, or eagle from another angle. Some angels are bright, shining, and fiery, while others look like ordinary humans. Some angels are invisible, but their presence is felt, and their voice is heard. Luke tells us in chapter 2 that the shepherds in the fields were absolutely terrified when the Angel of the Lord appeared to them.

Gabriel tells Mary "Do not be afraid" but Luke gives us no indication whatsoever that that Mary is afraid – Luke says she's perplexed and wondering what's going on. The Greek word for perplexed is *diatarassó* (dee-at-ar-as'-so) – meaning intensely going back-and-forth (to-and-fro) between inner thoughts and emotions – and it's only used once in the NT and only here. Luke tells us that Mary is trying to work out how this plan was going to work. She asks Gabriel, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" She's not making excuses, she's asking for an explanation – how's this going to work? I've never been with a man. I'm a virgin. Luke is giving us an insight into Mary's personality here and into the kind of home that Jesus is being born into. The kind of home that God specifically chose for Jesus to be brought up in. Not one in which his mother is timid and afraid or hard-headed and stubborn, but a mother that's unafraid to question an Angel of the Lord about the logistics of God's plan for her life. A mother that's inquisitive and ready to rise to the occasion, a mother who understands the calling, the responsibility, the singularity of

her role in human history and does not shrink from it. She is one of a kind, and the same can be said for each and every one of us.

I come from a long line of strong women. Some of you have heard me tell stories about my grandmother, Mama Abear, who at 95, still living on her own, heard a man breaking into her garage. Well, let me tell you, she wasn't having it so she walked out of her front door (in her night gown), pointed her finger at him and hollered at that thief to put her things back in the garage and lock the door behind him and get out of there – and believe it or not, that's exactly what he did. At 103, she's still a strong, inquisitive and amazing woman who has loved and served God her entire life.

Mary asks a clarifying question and when she responds we see that her words aren't words of fear but words of confidence and readiness. Mary doesn't make excuses as to why she can't be the mother of the savior of the world. She doesn't question her ability. Throughout biblical history, we see people making excuses of why they're not up to the tasks – look at Moses – God appeared to Moses to as a burning bush, and called him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, but Moses made excuses. I've never been eloquent. I don't speak well. What if they don't believe me or listen to me. And we see earlier in Luke chapter 1, when Gabriel told Zechariah that he and Elizabeth would have a son. Zechariah threw out the excuses “I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years” and Gabriel shut him up – he muted him until the day John was born. But not Mary. She didn't look for reasons why God's plan wouldn't work. She didn't highlight her inadequacies nor did she search for options, other ways that the divine design might unfold through others of greater ability or social status. She knew it would be difficult. She knew there would be complications for her and Joseph – ridicule for an unwed pregnancy. And instead of making excuses, she says “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word”

Gabriel then tells Mary that Elizabeth, has also conceived a son. And so Mary, this young girl, who's just been told that even though she's a virgin she's going to bear a son that will be the savior of the whole world, packs her things and sets out with haste to visit Elizabeth, the one person she knows will be understand. Luke tells us that when Mary gets to the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, John leaps in her womb and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy spirit and cries out “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb”

Overcome by Elizabeth's greeting, Mary can't help but sing praises about God's promises.

She says

“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness 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 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 thoughts 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 helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

In her song, Mary claims the title of being “blessed” a title that’s been given to her by both Gabriel and Elizabeth. In our culture, the term “blessed” has become a meme, a hashtag, and “feeling blessed” is something you see often in Facebook posts or tweets. People post photos of themselves enjoying a delicious meal or a relaxing vacation or a shopping spree at their favourite store. “Blessed” has come to mean living a life of comfort and privilege and using the term has become a way of celebrating those moments.

The blessedness that Mary is celebrating is a glaring contrast to our version of #blessed. By our modern standards, she doesn’t seem blessed at all. Yes, God has chosen her to be the mother of the saviour of the world but what does that really mean for her? She’s a nobody, a poor peasant girl from Nazareth – and nothing good comes from Nazareth. People see her as a disgrace because she’s pregnant and unwed. And later she’ll learn from Simeon that she will bear the unimaginable grief of watching her son as he is scorned, shamed and crucified and that “a sword will pierce her own soul too”.

But despite all of this, Mary praises God for honouring her. She sees God's action in her life as consistent with God's saving action in history and that God's plan is radically different from those in power. The God she celebrates is not content to just point people to heaven. God's plan is not for us to simply fly away from this old world and escape reality but God's redemptive work begins right here on earth. God fills the hungry not only with hope but with food. God doesn't just comfort the lowly, he lifts them up, granting them dignity and honour, a seat at the table, a voice in the conversation. Mary's song magnifies the Saviour who loves the whole world with a love that makes creation whole.

Sometimes we might hear people say don't question God's plans for your life. But the example that Mary gives us is that a certain kind of questioning is just fine. Not a questioning that's doubtful. But one that's inquisitive, that's curious, that wants to know the details of how this things going to work.

Mary never questions her own ability. She never doubts her qualifications because God chose her. She doesn't look at herself negatively or excuses why she can't fulfill this role. Luke implies that if God has chosen her, then he will grant her the ability. She doesn't question her worthiness or her ability to carry this out because she knows it's not her doing it. How much more joyous might our own lives be if we really fully grabbed ahold of the idea that what is to take place through us is God's doing and not our own. That when the Holy Spirit comes upon us and the power of the most High dwells with in us there's nothing we can't do – For nothing will be impossible with God – and like Mary, we can participate in God's redemptive plan for the world by saying, "here am I". Here am I, God. Use me.

And so as we begin this season of Advent when we look toward the arrival of Jesus, may we also be reminded that we too are highly favoured, blessed and called for a purpose. That we are part of God's redemptive work right here on earth, right here in our towns and communities and may our souls magnify the Lord and our spirits rejoice in God our Saviour. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. Amen