

The Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
December 19, 2021
Micah 5:2-5a
Canticle 3
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

What Mary Said

“And Mary said....” Wow. The things Mary said. Can you even wrap your mind and heart and soul around the things Mary said?

What prompted, who prompted what Mary said? Her cousin Elizabeth. Her elderly cousin Elizabeth married to an elderly priest named Zechariah. They were a couple who had longed to have a child for the many years of their marriage.

One day while serving in the temple in Jerusalem, it was Zechariah's turn to offer the incense—kind of like being a thurifer. All the people were praying outside.

While he was alone before the altar of incense, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and gave him a message. Zechariah was terrified. Gabriel said, “Don't be afraid. Your prayers have been heard.” At long last he and Elizabeth would become parents. They would have a son, and they were to name him John—not Zechariah after his father as was customary.

Gabriel indicated that many would rejoice at John's birth, that the baby would bring joy and gladness to his parents, and that he should be brought up in a very particular way, set apart for service from the beginning.

And Gabriel said that this child John would have the spirit of Elijah, would turn the hearts of parents to their children, and would lead the disobedient to the wisdom of right relating. His mission would be one of preparation.

Zechariah was astonished at this message. He asked how he could know if this message were true. Here's how, said Gabriel, you won't be able to speak until the baby is born!

Given their ages, the pregnancy was a miracle. For five months Elizabeth, delighted by the prospect of having a child at last, stayed in seclusion.

And in month six of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel on the move again visits her cousin Mary, Mary who is engaged to Joseph, in a town north of Jerusalem called Nazareth, in the region of Galilee.

Gabriel says, "Greetings, favored one. God is with you."

Mary is perplexed at this greeting. She ponders what sort of greeting it might be, what holy sort of happening she might be caught up in.

And to Mary, as to Zechariah, Gabriel says, "Don't be afraid. You have found favor with God. You're going to have a baby whom you will name Jesus, a baby who will be great and who will be called the Son of the Most High."

Mary doesn't seem afraid; she seems curious. She doesn't ask, as did Zechariah, "How do I know this message is true?" Her question is, "How is this possible?"

Gabriel's explanation is that nothing is impossible for God. And, as proof of same, he tells Mary that her elderly cousin Elizabeth has conceived a child and is sixth months along in her pregnancy.

Mary's response—what Mary says: "I am God's servant. Let God's plan unfold, and let me play my part."

When Gabriel departs, so does Mary. And that's where we pick up in our gospel today. She goes to see Elizabeth down in the hill country of Judea. Mary, who doesn't ask for proof from Gabriel, decides to go see for herself.

Elizabeth recognizes Mary of course. At the sound of Mary's voice, Elizabeth's baby recognizes her, too, and leaps for joy in Elizabeth's womb. And Elizabeth lets fly some amazing language: *Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.* And, "How am I so lucky as to be visited by the mother of my Lord?" And, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by God."

It's a happy reunion, a wonderful visit. Mary stays with Elizabeth and Zechariah for three months, that is, Elizabeth's third trimester and Mary's first one. Mary returns home before Elizabeth gives birth to John.

We could understand this visit by Mary to Elizabeth in a variety of ways. Of course, one way is, as I've suggested, she went to see for herself if this miraculous

pregnancy of Elizabeth and Zechariah was true. We could also understand it as the first recorded instance in scripture of a girl in trouble going away to stay with relatives. Or we could understand it as Mary going to see her spiritual director: someone wise whom she trusts and with whom she shares the sacred journey of her life.

In any case, Mary's response to Elizabeth's greeting—what Mary said—is remarkable. We have been quoting it ever since. We call it the Magnificat because Mary begins by saying, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

In her response to Elizabeth's words of blessing, Mary joins a passel of prophets and all her ancestors who had dared to dream God's dream of a world set right-side up because turned upside-down.

She takes her place among the strongest and truest and most visionary of God's people.

Not because she is so strong or true or visionary on her own but because she lives in intimate partnership with the God who is the great I AM.

God's life lives in her and through her. And she knows it. And she testifies to it.

And in our gospel today the amazing things she says she verily sings as a song to an audience of one, her cousin Elizabeth. And that solo has become one of the greatest songs of hope and vision sung by the church through the ages.

In today's gospel, she sings a solo. But she connects her life, her hope, and her witness to all her ancestors in faith, all her forebears who came before and also to all her descendants to come as well.

That is, she sings her song which was also their song, which is also our song.

She sings a solo and sings in first-person singular. But this is our song as well as hers and we might well sing it in first-person plural.

How might that song sound in English to our ears today?

Perhaps something like this:

Our soul magnifies The Holy One,

and our spirit rejoices in God our Savior,
the Great One who looks with favor on our lowliness,
on us who are willing to be servants of the Most High.
Surely, from now on all generations will call us blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for us.
And holy, holy, holy is God's name.
God's mercy is for all of us who live in awe,
from generation to generation.
The Great One is strong to deliver;
Has flung away the daydreams of those who are proud in themselves;
Has pulled down those who have climbed up on thrones;
And lifted up those who are humble and depend on God;
Has given good things to eat to those who are hungry;
And has sent the arrogantly self-sufficient packing.
The Holy One has helped those who are servants of peace and wellbeing for all,
In remembrance of the great compassion promised to our ancestors, to Abraham
and Sarah and their descendants forever.

As we look back over salvation history, at all the ways God has acted through and on behalf of God's people, we see that what is described in Mary's song, the Magnificat, has happened many times and has in some ways not yet happened fully and for always.

Mary's song describes God's reign, the time, the situation, the reality, the circumstance when all is truly set right to stay that way. We experience that reality, that reign, in moments or hours or seasons. Yet it seems that the full inbreaking of that reality for everyone everywhere for always is still somewhere ahead of us in God's unfolding future.

Mary's song reminds us that God has been and is still active and acting and will continue to act and be active. And her song reminds us that we, like she, are agents and instruments of God's activity.

We can easily become impatient for everything to already be alright, obviously improved, perfected, complete in ways that we can easily detect, about which we have no hesitation or doubt.

Perhaps that impatience, that discomfort, that dis-ease with things when they are in process and not yet where we hope they will wind up, is part of what often leads us to run and jump over the on-the-way-but-not-yet-there nature of this season of

Advent, this season and space and attitude of preparation, expectation, self-examination, and making room that isn't over yet, that lasts until Christmas actually begins on Friday evening, Christmas Eve.

There are times perhaps when we pray the words of Mary's song asking to be able to keep believing in the possibility of a truly and fully redeemed world where all is set right for keeps.

There are seasons when our hope burns brightly and seasons when perhaps it dies down a bit or a lot. But the flame of our hope doesn't go completely out.

And in this I think we are in very good company.

Don't you imagine that Mary who was willing to serve and on board with God's plan from the get-go also had moments when she kept singing that song and willing herself to keep going? When she and Joseph and the baby flee for their lives into Egypt? When twelve-year-old Jesus gives her a fright by staying behind in the temple? When her son seems beside himself out on his preaching and teaching mission? When her firstborn is arrested? At the foot of the cross? After he was laid in a tomb? Surely even Mary had questions in the midst of all her pondering.

So, if we in this anticipated season of joy that often turns hectic and leaves us frazzled and exhausted, and if after nearly two years of pandemic living and not knowing what may have to be changed or altered or stopped altogether next...if in such a time as this we find ourselves fanning the embers to get our hope to burn brightly again, we are, we always are, in good company.

And, even so, remembering that we are in good company, feeling the pinch of the discrepancy between the now and the not yet can wear on us, wear us down, and sometimes wear us out.

When I need a booster in my believing that God's reign will come in full to stay and a reminder of the evidence that it is among us even now, I find comfort in some poetic words from the Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard was born in 1881 and died in 1955. In addition to being a priest, he was also a paleontologist. So, he knew a thing or two about how time is a factor in the coming to fruition of many things.

I offer you these words of Teilhard:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability—
and that it may take a very long time. And so I think it is with you.
your ideas mature gradually – let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste. Don't try to force them on, as
though you could be today what time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will)
will make of you tomorrow. Only God could say what this new spirit gradually
forming within you will be. Give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is
leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.

(—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. [1881-1955])

Dear ones, God is with us in our waiting, in our hurry, in our anxiety, our
incompleteness. God's life lives in us and through us. And we know it. So let's
continue to testify to it, keep singing Mary's song which is also our song. And let
us continue our work of preparing so that Christ Jesus may find in each of us and
all of us at his coming, as today's collect says, "a mansion prepared for himself."