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Advent 3
December 13, 2020

This morning in place of our Psalm, we prayed the Magnificat, or the Song of Mary. It comes from the first chapter of Luke and is a song of praise that Mary sings during a visit from her cousin, Elizabeth. The story of this visit is one that most of us know well. Mary and Elizabeth together for the first time since both of them have discovered that they are carrying children under miraculous circumstances. Mary is young and unmarried and a virgin. Elizabeth is aging and has been unable to bear children all the many years of her marriage, and now she is pregnant with John, who will be a great messenger of God. If the miraculous pregnancies of these women were not enough, the children to be born will have great roles to play in nothing less than the salvation of the world.

During this encounter, we are told that Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and proclaims to Mary her blessing, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.... And blessed is she who believed that there would be^[a] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” For many of us in Mary’s situation, blessed would not be the word to describe our feelings. The angel Gabriel visited Mary in a night vision to tell her that she was favored by the Lord and would conceive and bear a child by the power of the Holy Spirit who would be the long-awaited Messiah of Israel.

If we had been in Mary’s situation, we might have struggled with the idea that this news was good news. Mary was engaged to Joseph and lived during a time and culture when telling your fiancée that you were pregnant before the wedding could result in harsh repercussions, including abandonment by Joseph and even her own family. And interestingly, the Gospel of Luke doesn’t mention this, but Matthew’s Gospel tells us that upon learning of Mary’s pregnancy, Joseph had decided to dismiss her. Until he received his own night visit from the Angel of the Lord, reassuring Joseph that the child growing in Mary was indeed from the Holy Spirit and conceived to be the savior of Israel.

Mary had reason to be puzzled by the message brought to her by Gabriel, and she was. But she was never scared as Zechariah, father of John, was when visited by the Angel. Or as the shepherds in Bethlehem were when the Angel of the Lord visited them with the good news about Jesus. Luke tells us that Mary did not respond to the Angel out of fear, but out of faith. She answered Gabriel with these words: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Let it be, she says. And the Magnificat that she sings proclaims God’s greatness and proclaims her own blessedness in God working through her to bring this savior into the world.

Just a couple of centuries after Mary’s death, the Eastern Church began to call her “theotokos” which is Greek for God-bearer. There are icons drawn of Mary which portray her as the burning bush. Like the burning bush where Moses encountered God, in these icons, Mary contains God but is not consumed by God.

Mary, the God-bearer, is a beautiful and powerful image, but it comes with its share of pain and suffering.

Upon saying yes to God, Mary's life is changed irrevocably. She will give birth in a barn and the first resting place for this child, this incarnation of God, will be the animals' feeding trough. She and Joseph and Jesus will begin their life together as refugees in Egypt, having fled the murderous King Herod. Even after Herod's death and a return to Nazareth, raising Jesus will not be easy as we see when he is a boy in the Temple and forgets to tell his worried mother that he won't be traveling back to Nazareth with them. Or even when he reaches adulthood and rejects his mother and siblings in front of the crowd.

But Mary is there through it all, even the unspeakable grief of losing a child. In the Gospel of John, she stands near the cross as Jesus breathes his last breath.

Mary said yes to God. Because she understood how Israel and the world needed a messiah. The song she sings reveals what a messiah will mean. God's saving action in Jesus will overturn society's structures by bringing down the powerful and lifting up the powerless. This isn't meant to be a reversal where the poor become rich and the rich become poor, but a social leveling where all can be equal with one another and sit together at the same table. In Mary's song, the rich may be sent away empty, but this doesn't mean that doors are shut in their faces. If the rich return, realizing what they hunger for and that only God can provide it, the door will be opened and it will become clear that we are only truly fed when all are fed.

Mary said yes and became God-bearer for the world. And while it may be hard for us to believe, this is the relationship that God wishes to have with each of us. The will of God cannot be imposed upon us. God is no tyrant. God enters our lives through our own cooperation. When we freely give our yes, as Mary did, we can begin to be God-bearers for the world, as well.

But in doing so, our lives will change, just as Mary's did. We will cease to live for ourselves and begin to live to bring about God's dream for the world. This does not mean we miraculously become humble and gracious and unselfish overnight, but it means we begin to turn our gaze away from ourselves toward others and to the connection that we all share.

Like Mary, John the Baptist said yes to God. Our Gospel tells us that John was sent from God to testify to the light that all might believe. When asked to explain who he was, John proclaimed, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" John was a God-bearer. He encouraged people to repent and turn their lives around to make space for the love of God—to live as if the love of God and love of neighbor were the only things that mattered.

Will we follow in the footsteps of Mary and John? As we prepare ourselves for the coming of God in Jesus, as we do each Advent...how might we welcome God to be born in us as well? How might we become God-bearers for a hurting world? Will we say as Mary did, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." May it be so. Amen.