

Luke 1:39-56
Gratitude
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
11/27/16

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And 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 mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

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

Let the good news come now, Father, not only in word, but also in power and with great assurance. For we ask now in the power of the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ your Son, the coming Savior and Lord. Amen.

When we receive unexpected news, what’s our immediate reaction? Do we lean into hope, or do we respond with cynicism like much of our culture? I want to suggest that among the things Advent teaches us is the unique ability to wait expectantly—with hope over skepticism.

John Oliver is a British comedian and the host of a program called *Last Week Tonight*—a cable news program that uses cutting sarcasm and cynicism to report current events. A few weeks ago, he closed out 2016 by airing a 26-minute-long profanity-laced diatribe that, in so many words, basically said

“2016 was the worst.” His remarks went viral and apparently resonated with a great many in our society.

We live in the age of cynicism, where it is more fashionable to deconstruct an idea or action, pointing out its absurdity, than to search for the deeper meaning and beauty that still binds us to one another.

A writer by the name of David Foster Wallace puts it this way: Sarcasm, parody, absurdism and irony are great ways to strip off stuff’s mask and show the unpleasant reality behind it. All we seem to want to do is keep ridiculing the stuff. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what’s wrong.”

But it’s tempting. 2016 in many ways has been a challenging year—many of us have felt it in poignant ways. I’ll concede, this was a tough year for the Cornell household. Even a Cubs World Series—which is definitely among the brightest moments—struggles to emerge from behind the shadow of everything else.

But in many ways, this is the appropriate way for us to enter into the season of Advent. As the great hymn speaks, hope is a thrilling, even mystifying thing; it makes the weary world rejoice. As people who are molded and shaped by Jesus Christ, we have a categorically different way to approach the world in which we live. When the headlines tempt us to despair and the advertisements stir up anxiety, we are invited into watchful silence, to waiting patiently, hopefully, for a different way.

The incarnation, God becoming flesh in Jesus, tells us there is another way, a counter narrative. What we read in the words of Scripture offer us profound hope that sometimes good news comes dressed as bad news. So this Advent, we are going to be looking at 4 prayers from the Gospel of Luke inviting us to watch for signs of hope. In each prayer is an action, a discipline for us to adopt as we wait for the Lord’s coming. This week, Mary, in her beautiful hymn the Magnificat, invites us to a posture of gratitude.

When Mary first encounters the Angel Gabriel, he offers her good news, but it sure does sound like something other than good news. Mary is probably not more than 13 or 14, since the age of betrothal in this culture began at about 12 years old. She lives in a town that is so far to the margin of the Roman Empire that Luke has to tell us that it’s in the region of Judah, Nazareth. And as someone who is unwed, living in a fiercely conservative Jewish culture, the news of an unplanned pregnancy would not have sounded like good news.

When we think about what’s happened this past month, when you think about what’s happened this last year, I wonder what it sounds like to you.

Mary, to make sense of it, travels to see her cousin Elizabeth. And Luke says that when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, perhaps filled with anxiety for what it meant, it says that the child inside of her leapt.

I wonder, maybe it was in this moment that Mary finally heard good news. You see, the antidote for anxiety and worry is community. You ever notice that we are most anxious when we’re isolated? Anxiety has a hard time flourishing in the context of loving community. When we live in intentional

relationships of community, we become people who known for our gratitude—even in the face of challenging circumstances.

Let me give you an example. March 13th will go down as one of the most challenging and difficult days of my life. That was the day that Amy and I were in a life changing car accident. As the doors closed on the ambulance and we parted ways, Amy to Fort Wayne and I to Wabash with our two youngest children, I sunk lower than I ever have been. And yet waiting for us at the Hospital were members of this church. People who were there to hold our children, even nurse them, and be by my side as the thoughts and concerns began to swirl. When I saw them, something inside me leapt. It was hope, it was gratitude, it was God's Spirit of comfort and healing, already redeeming bad news into good.

Sometimes we need to have someone remind us to point our gaze heavenward. Albert Einstein has a quote that says there are two ways of looking at the world: 1. As if nothing is a miracle; 2. As if everything is a miracle.

In community, we share the task of pointing one another toward God's redemptive work among us. And in so doing, we become more grateful, hope-filled, generous, longsuffering, compassionate people.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth preaches Good News to her young cousin: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Elizabeth, through the eyes of faith, is able to reorient Mary's heart from anxiety, to hope and gratitude. She, through her sharing of this moment of extreme vulnerability, is able to turn Mary's uncertainty into celebration. So that the very next words from Mary's mouth come some of the most powerful hope-filled words of thanksgiving ever written:

My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will called me blessed. He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

My friends, we are the people who can choose gratitude instead of despondency; opportunity over defeat; hope when all that surrounds us is cynicism.

Mary, in the presence of her family, is able to see clearly, in a way that she may not have been able to before. Elizabeth reminds her of the characteristic faithfulness of God. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, amen.

Looking down at the verbs used to describe God's actions toward his people, you'll notice that they all appear to be in the past tense: he has shown, has scattered, has brought down, has filled, has helped. All of these verbs are in what is called the aorist tense. Here is a unique feature of the Greek language. The aorist tense expresses what is timelessly true. It was true in the past, it's true now, it will be true until the end of time. God's mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation.

So with that in mind:

Who would look at the story of a teenage, unwed pregnant girl and see good news? We would.

Who would have looked at the death of Lazarus and Jesus waiting to go and visit the tomb and seen good news? We would.

Who would have looked at the man from Nazareth, slung out upon a cross, and seen good news? We would.

Friends, in the midst of what has been a very trying and at times confusing year, you have been a living testimony to the good news, the Gospel of God's renewing and restoring ministry in this community.

You've loved a pastor and his family back to life.

You've welcomed in single mothers and fathers giving them unconditional love and support.

You've loved those who are overlooked and marginalized in our community

You've showed compassion and care for those without

You've provided a place for advocates of the broken and abused to find a place find strength.

You've provided meals on a weekly basis for the weary well-doers, reminding them that the struggle is worth the effort.

You've thrown baby showers for young families who you may not even really know yet.

You've given validation and appreciation to volunteers who give tirelessly.

You've invested in our new Children's Ministry and affirmed with your actions the value of teaching our children the stories of Scripture through Godly Play.

You've supported Local and Global Missionaries.

You've sent teams to West Virginia, and now Cuba.

And you've prayed. For one another and for us.

When I look at the condition of our society and the state of our world through the lens of Wabash Presbyterian, I see courageous, bold, counter-cultural hope. My heart leaps knowing that there is a place that isn't imprisoned by the cultural narrative of skepticism and cynicism, but rather stands tall on the words of the Psalmist saying:

"Magnify the Lord with me, let US exult His name TOGETHER. Taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed is the one who takes refuge in him."

No matter what may come in 2017, WE are the Community of Christ, the redeemed of God. And what this encounter between Mary and Elizabeth presents is an opportunity to rejoice in praise and thanksgiving in whatever circumstance we face. To hear the words of St. Paul and take them down deep into our hearts and believe that nothing can separate us from the Love of God that is in Christ Jesus, neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation.

In all things, Wabash Presbyterian, may we be people who give thanks, people who resist the siren song of cynicism, and face our world with gratitude.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.