

Luke 1:46-56

46 And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour 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 for ever.'

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

Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For

nothing will be impossible with God.’³⁸ Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.

Sermon

Today is pink Sunday, or Gaudete Sunday, which is the third Sunday of Advent. We call it this because it’s the first word of the chant which opens worship in the very traditional, Latin Catholic church. Gaudete in Domino semper, or “rejoice in the Lord always.” Often this is the Sunday of John the Baptist in our sort of liturgical ordering, but we’re going to switch it up this year and talk about Mary. Which, if you ask me, is a better fit for a Sunday of rejoicing than John and his brood of vipers, his hair shirt and his pronouncements of sin and repentance and coming doom. Although, just to be clear, I love John as well.

But Mary. Mary I can get behind. I love her story, her willingness to offer her very body to serve the Lord, by bearing the savior of the world. She sings that beautiful song we call the Magnificat, and she just seems so likeable. Mother Mary, meek and mild. Mary, the girl who said yes to God.

I’ve preached dozens of sermons about Mary, because I love her. And I’ve heard dozens of sermons about her, because in a way we all sort of love her. And if I’m honest, this year I’m sort of struck by how flexibly we treat her as a character. I’m guilty of this as well, so I’m not casting stones, so much as pointing out something odd. Whenever we talk about Mary, and what it must have felt like to be her in that moment, I think it’s incredibly tempting to project ourselves and our own fears back onto her, and let that be the story.

When I was pregnant, I remember talking about Mary, wondering if she was afraid of childbirth, of being so young, her body so fragile. Of course this fear likely said more about me in that moment than Mary. Although it would be reasonable to think childbirth was even more terrifying to a teenager in the first century.

On another occasion I remember musing on the complications of teenage pregnancy, and pregnancy out of wedlock, and the concerns that might have brought, the eyebrows which would have been raised. And again, it’s an interesting thought, but likely way off base as my questions were firmly rooted in a 21 c. cultural milieu, not the very foreign world of first century Palestine.

I was visiting a church once where the pastor, who shall remain anonymous, preached a real stinker of a Christmas Eve sermon, God bless him, where he told us all he and his wife knew what it felt like to be Mary and Joseph because once upon a time, when his wife was 5 months pregnant, he was driving through a dark night in Colorado, and it took them three whole towns to find a motel with any vacancy. Three! Whole! Towns! Can you believe it!? That’s definitely on par with donkey travel to a distant village, in a time when motels and hotels did not exist, while literally in labor.

Or recently I was reading an article by a man struggling with the idea of whether or not women should be allowed to be ordained and officiate at the sacraments. In his musings, he made the point that Mary is, quite literally, the only person in history who can accurately say about Jesus—“This is my body, this is my blood.” Which are words I say at communion, and initially this point made me feel kind of a warm and fuzzy camaraderie for Mary. But in the end, he pointed out that Mary was special, unlike us other lady types, and he still only believes in the priesthood of men, and women pastors are heretics and leading us all down the rosy path to perdition, and I threw his article into the metaphorical fire.

All of this to point out—often with very good intention, we make Mary all about us. What we’re feeling, thinking about, afraid of, or wrapped up in. And I think we do this, in part, because like a lot of women in scripture, we just assume she’s a flat character, someone with very little speaking role, who just sort of exists to carry Jesus in her body for a while. It’s as if we forget her entire song. Mary, without the Magnificat, is kind of a pliable character.

And instead of telling you what I mean, I’m going to show you. I put together a slide show of some images of Mary.

(talk through images)

It’s not bad that Mary can be a flexible character for us. In fact, it’s really wonderful to grapple and wrestle with the stories of scripture to the degree and depth we do with Mary. But it’s always good to remember that she has a voice, and that we would always do well to heed her song—and remember that she is, in all ways, a fundamentally political character. Her fears, her concerns, her hopes, they’re for the poor, the outcast, the downtrodden and forgotten. And on this Sunday of rejoicing, we would do well to remember that this is the God Mary rejoices in. The God who sees. The God who remembers. The God who brings about the unexpected.