

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 35: 1-10
SECOND LESSON: Luke 1:46-55
December 11, 2022

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

“Rejoicing in God”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A woman named Patty shared a story online about a time when her son was 8 years old. He was in a Christmas Pageant at their church. His lines started with, “And the Virgin Mary was with Child.” He practiced and practiced. He got it down correctly at every rehearsal. On the night the of the presentation everything was going wonderfully. All the children were relaxed and able to recite their lines flawlessly. Then it came time for her son to recite his lines and this is exactly how it came out: **“And the Viking Mary was with Child.”** Somehow the adults managed to not bust out laughing . . . barely!

Mary was not a Viking, but she must have been an extremely unusual and independent young woman. She was only about 15 or 16, and she traveled alone, pregnant and unmarried to her relative Elizabeth’s house. Admittedly she probably wasn’t showing at the time given the advantage of loose clothes, but the normal thing for a family to do would have been to keep Mary hidden and out of sight. Did she even tell them what was going on? We know nothing of the human details of her life, but something extraordinary was happening and Mary could not be contained. All we are told is that, “At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth.”

When Mary entered the home, the baby jumped in Elizabeth’s womb and she proclaimed in a loud voice: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

Elizabeth, the older married woman, was the one who should have been honored, but instead she honors Mary, and recognizes the child she is carrying, calling him “my Lord.” And Mary responds with words that have since come to be known as “The Magnificat,” from the Latin translation of the word “magnify.” In the Greek in which Luke was written, the root of this word is mega, and I mention that because we use mega today. We talk about megabytes, megaphones, megastores and megachurches. It means to make something big. Mary was making God’s name big. She was declaring God’s glory.

Now the question I always ask myself when conversations are recorded in scripture is, “was anyone there taking notes?” And even when there is a witness, as good as memory can sometimes be, we always end up with a stylized account. Mary’s words and Elizabeth’s are written in a poetic prophetic

style. Furthermore, they are translations of the original Aramaic or Hebrew, not Latin or Greek! But even if the words we have are not identical to those that were spoken, the central message of them would have been preserved. What Mary said boiled down to eleven things. The first three are personal. She said:

- That her soul is filled with praise and joy in God.
- That God has thought of her even though she has no status in society at all.
- That from now on she will be called blessed because God has singled her out.

She then went on to describe God's nature and works, saying:

- God is merciful from one generation to the next.
- God is powerful.
- God knocks the proud off their feet.
- God brings down rulers who think they are above the law.
- God lifts up the humble and poor.
- God feeds needy people and helps them.
- God does not give to greedy people who want even more. God sends them away with empty hands.
- God has remembered Israel and all the descendants of Abraham

Everything Mary says exudes what is sometimes called the "great reversal." The first shall be last and the last first. And when we stop to ponder a moment on the teachings of Jesus, it was this young woman who raised him. God chose her knowing that these were the lessons she would pass on. God promises hope for those who have lost all hope, and honor for those society tramples on. The way we have structured our world is not the way God wants us to structure our world. And as young as she was Mary knew this. That is remarkable, because young Jewish women of her time were not encouraged to think deeply on spiritual, political or social matters. It was expected that Mary would accept her lowly position in society and get on with it. It was expected that Mary would believe she was inferior and not question. It was assumed that she would conclude that the powerful were powerful because God gave them that power and they deserved it, and the poor were powerless and poor because they were inherently inferior. Poor people were not to question their lot in life. Poor women were really not supposed to question their lot in life. And Mary did all of this. Mary dared to speak **prophetically**.

Mary also said she was blessed by God. Earlier this fall we talked about how different our version of "blessed" is from the biblical idea of being blessed. We say we are blessed with comfort and security, nice homes and healthy children. We are blessed when everything is going well and we just got a promotion. But that is not God's idea of "blessed." To be blessed is to be close to God. To be blessed is to be in the center of God's will. In our terms Mary was not blessed at all! She was a peasant girl from a tiny village in a really awkward situation—pregnant outside of marriage. She had no money and no social standing. If anything, she teetered on the edge of social ruin. And Mary's future would be no easier. Simeon prophesied in the temple when Jesus was dedicated to God saying, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of

many in Israel ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” (Luke 2:34–35). Mary would suffer greatly as she watched her beloved son face opposition, and finally watched him suffer and die. This is not our idea of blessed. But Mary was in the center of God’s will and plan, and God gave her a clear vision, a vision that probably carried her for decades. The God who turns things upside down was at work. Rejoice! God’s priorities are not ours. God’s design for how society should work is not ours. God’s favored ones are not the Elon Musks, Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates of the world. What brings people status in this world counts for nothing in the kingdom of God.

What causes our hearts to rejoice? At this time of year with the barrage of advertising coming at us from every angle we might think it is material things, but when we consider possessing these things without our loved ones, *they quickly turn to ash*. They mean nothing. A mansion is nothing without a loving family living in it. Those who have sought fame and fortune discover this soon enough. It is hollow and even painful if you are living alone in a mansion, and especially so if those close to you are only close to you because of greed and self-interest. If a person’s nearest and dearest would turn around in a heartbeat and publish a tell-all, there is no safe place. Except for maybe a puppy, money cannot buy love.

It is the season of Christmas. And I know there is a lot of pressure on people. I feel it too. We have to decorate our homes and buy gifts. There are cookies to bake. Some plan to travel to be with loved ones far away. There is just so much to DO, we forget how to BE. We forget to rejoice in God. We lose sight of God’s ultimate plan, a new creation in which all are cherished, justice and mercy are in the air we breathe and exploitation is a thing of the past.

In the Old Testament the prophet Isaiah spoke of a highway that will lead the redeemed back home. It was a prophecy on two levels—the more immediate promised return from exile, and the end when all will be made right. Isaiah wrote: “They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.” Like Mary, no matter what is going on in our lives right now, let us stop long enough to let gladness and joy overtake us. Amen.

Isaiah 35: 1-10

1 The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.

Like the crocus, **2** it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendor of our God.

3 Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;

4 say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, do not fear;

your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you.”
⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.
⁷ The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.
⁸ And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
⁹ No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
¹⁰ and those the Lord has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Luke 1:46-55

⁴⁶ And Mary said:
“My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”