

MARY — BLESSED IN BELIEVING

Luke 1:39-55
December 22, 2024

“Blessed is she who **believed** ...

I stopped reading our lesson from the gospel at verse 45. I am persuaded that this verse contains the message of Good News for us today. Many sermons will be preached today on The Magnificat, the label given to the next ten verses. Don't put your text away yet. We will get to that in a minute. But the key word in text for me is **believed**.

Actually, there are three words for us to look at this morning as we understand believing:

PROMISE ... BELIEF ... JOY

God's salvation story is told throughout scripture through promises.

God's promise to Abraham that, through Sara, he would be the father of all nations

God's promise to Noah never to destroy humanity again, signified by a rainbow

...

and others

This brings me to the narrative we read today. We must, first, focus on the context in which we read the Magnificat. That means stepping back even further than where our lesson today begins.

There are two prophetic, angelic events that we need to look at. The first is Gabriel's visit to Zachariah. Zachariah was a temple priest, one of the holiest positions one could occupy. It was while he was in the holy-of-holiest places in the temple where the incense was burnt, that Angel Gabriel appeared to him. He was terrified. Gabriel spoke to him saying: “Do not be afraid, Zachariah, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.” (1:12-13). A woman in those days lacked full stature until she gave birth to a child. Elizabeth was well past child-bearing age. Zacharias' response was, in affect: “No way!” For his unbelief he became dumb/unable to speak “because you did not believe my words”. Angel Gabriel was busy delivering God's Word these days. He next paid a visit to a young, peasant, virgin girl named Mary. “Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you” and goes on at length to describe to

Mary the circumstance in which she finds herself, including the fact that her relative, Elizabeth, is already pregnant with a son in her old age, that she, Mary, will conceive and bear a son. “Nothing will be impossible with God” he said. (1:28-37) Mary’s response to Gabriel was this: “[I believe you]; let it be done to me according to your word.” (1:38)

This is where our text for today begins. I think it is important to remember this context of the annunciation in order to fully grasp the good news I proclaim today. We read these words said by Elizabeth to Mary: “Blessed [are you] who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” (1:45)

So now let’s look at The Magnificat. I want to suggest that we read here a song of :

PROMISE ... BELIEF ... JOY

Mary begins her song with words of praise, quoting different translations:

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

“I’m bursting with God-news; I’m dancing the song of my Savior God.” (The Message)

Mary is a model of faith. She shows a faithful embrace of her role in God's plan of salvation. She trusts God’s word, rather than doubts the angel’s prophesy. She hears the promise, sings songs of joy, and believes.

This is a good time to contrast her response to that of Zachariah. Remember, his response to the angel was “No way!” We might also remember the apostle, Thomas—parenthetically, yesterday was the feast day of our patron saint—who refused to believe his fellow apostles that the resurrected Jesus had appeared to them. Believing is not that easy. Put yourself in this picture. Are you ready to believe the promises of God and proclaim such joy?

But we need to dig a bit further into The Magnificat. What specifically did Mary proclaim. As a prophet, she proclaimed the good news of God’s mission. Can you explain what follows as anything but an indwelling of the Holy Spirit. She proclaims, much like other utterances of prophetic voices, not the least of which being Jesus himself, that God will:

scatter the proud,
bring down the powerful from their thrones,
lift up the lowly,

feed the hungry
send the rich away empty,
welcome all to the banquet table

This is exactly what we see Jesus proclaiming and doing throughout his ministry. And this is exactly what God calls us to do to this day.

In her essay “Virgin Mary, Mother of God”, Kathleen Norris challenges the very notion that Mary was a gentle & mild woman in her day, a beauty queen, forever eighteen years old. She reflects that Mary was much more likely an olive-skinned, muscular young woman with calloused hands and feet, capable of long treks and hard, physical labor.

Actually, many understood the Magnificat to be the epitome of a revolutionary treatise. It is reported that the governments of Guatemala, India, and Argentina banned the recitation of the Magnificat when they feared being overthrown by the populace.

In 1933 Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “This is not the gentle and tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.”

So, how do we relate today to this Mary figure and her song of praise, believing, and joy? There are many ways to answer this question. It may lead to answering the question: are we ready to play a role, as Mary did, in the work of God today and say ‘yes’ to his will? Or we might go to the heart of the Christian Gospel and accept the responsibility of being an active agent in God’s work of justice and compassion to all of God’s creation?

Kathleen Norris asks the question this way: “Can you follow her leadership by allowing yourself to be moved to acts of compassion and social justice, by stepping into fear or uncertainty in order to courageously follow God’s call on our lives?”

I close with this very loose translation of the opening verse of the Magnificat. Imagine Mary saying it this way:

“My soul is alive with thoughts of God. What a wonder. Their liberating works. Though the world has been harsh to me, God has shown me kindness, seen my worth, and called me to courage.”

Can you respond to God's work in your life today with a response to God's promise with joy in your hearts, believing God's promises?

It is in **believing** that we are blessed!

AMEN