

Nothing Will Be Impossible with God

The Wise Women
Advent 2022 | Week 1

Luke 1:26-38

The phrase, "Fear not," when uttered by an angel to a human is a signal that something big is about to be announced (see the angels announcing the news to the shepherds in Luke 2). For Mary, this was that she was going to give birth to God's son. However, this news, at least historically, was not so good! She could have been dismissed by Joseph and potentially stoned to death. And yet this is good news of great joy because nothing will be impossible with God.

When have you experienced equally exciting and shocking news?

Luke 1:39-45

Mary travels to meet her cousin Elizabeth who is also pregnant. This, too, was a miraculous announcement from an angelic figure to her husband Zechariah who did not believe such good news. Elizabeth greets her with a bold statement, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child that you will bear!"

When is a moment in life where you have affirmed your faith or had a moment in which you felt God's presence? How did you react?

Fear not!

Mary and Elizabeth had plenty of reason to live in fear, yet they chose to focus on how God was active in their life (more on that next week). The faith of these women and the birth of Jesus separates us from our fears. The birth of Jesus frees us from the habits we are unable (or unwilling) to break ourselves. The birth of Jesus allows us to simply drop the false security we have been grasping so tightly, and learn to trust and cling to God instead. In that baby so meek and so mild, born in the most unexpected of places, sleeping in a feeding trough with the noises and stench of animals lies Jesus the Messiah, the Savior. He has come not to judge us with fire and brimstone rhetoric increasing the weight of our guilt. He comes to save us all from all of our sins, especially the ones that fear traps and hold us prisoner.

My Soul Magnifies the Lord

The Wise Women
Advent 2022 | Week 2

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Mary's song, called the Magnificat, has some theological backing to it. Hannah, Samuel's mother, sings a song very similar to that of Mary in Luke 1. Many scholars think that Mary knew her scripture and was able to lean back on how God has worked through others in the past to make sense of the significance of Jesus' birth. Who is someone in your family or faith development that you can look back to as formative?

Luke 1:46-50

In our next passage of Luke 1, we hear the first half of the Magnificat. Mary sings of a different sort of world than people were accustomed to, in fact it is a different world than we are used to! She sings of God reversing the status quo or, at the bare minimum, a leveling of the social hierarchy.

What do you think God's preferred future for this congregation looks like? What about the world?

Hope vs. Optimism

Around the time when Jesus was born, Herod the Great died and Jews rebelled all over the land. Roman armies crushed the Jewish rebellions and burned the city of Sepphoris in Galilee and reduced its inhabitants to slavery (Jesus grew up in Nazareth, about 4 miles from Sepphoris). Mary and Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth must have witnessed this horrific act. So, when God acts through Mary and Elizabeth, they dared to dream and live into a more hopeful future. The key element in living out this new reality is that it is filled with hope instead of optimism. You see, optimism believes that someone else will fix things, that we needn't be bothered to act. Hope, in contrast, doesn't leave solutions to others, but digs in and gets busy. Optimism is passive; hope is active. Mary and Elizabeth show us what it looks like to live with active hope.

According to the Promise

The Wise Women

Advent 2022 | Week 3

Isaiah 11:1-9

The vision of a world in which wolves and lambs, calves and lions all lie down together clearly moved beyond the possibilities of the present age. The description seems to partake of elements common to fables and fairy tales, but something else is at stake here. By bringing together in peace the child and the snake, the text reminds us of the enmity brought through human sin in Eden (Genesis 3:14-15). God will overcome the curse of sin and establish a world in which all creatures thrive.

Luke 1:51-56

In our final passage from Luke in this series, we finish up the Magnificat. In these verses she turns her attention to God's activity on behalf of and against others (vv. 50-55). Mary is announcing that her story, God's choice of blessing her to bear God's Son, is a part of the ongoing drama of God's activity in the world. This casts Mary as a prophet, one who boldly interprets her experience in light of God and God's history.

Rewrite Mary's song in your own words and understanding of how God has acted and will continue to act in the future.

Past Tense for a Present and Future Hope

Mary's song is filled bold imagery of God's divine action in our world, but it is crucial to note that Mary sings of such actions in the past tense. Modern English translations render the verbs in the perfect tense (for example, "has looked") implying an action in the past that continues on into the present. But the Greek verbs are all aorist, indicating actions completely completed in the past.

Thus, we see that the Magnificat is what O. Wesley Allen Jr. calls a paradoxical prophecy. "It speaks of a future God will bring in through the yet-to-be-born messiah using past tense verbs. There is a sense, then, in which Mary in the gospel is proclaiming that already at the point of awaiting the coming of the messiah, salvation is a done deal." Because Mary and Elizabeth have this dangerous hope of a new future when the empire will not be the one controlling everything, when the lowly are lifted and the mighty are brought down, they realize that they are called to take part in that future in the present day. God has made good on promises in the past, God has promised to do something new in the future, so Mary and Elizabeth want to live into that covenantal hope right now. When they greet each other, when they exchange good news, then Mary sings - they dare to live into God's preferred future right now.