

12-22-24 Words of Worship

Welcome --

Call to Worship --

Prayer – O God, thank you for sending Jesus to us as the one of peace. Be present with us as we worship; let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you.

Hymns --

Light the Advent Candles – Jared, Laura, Ellie, Logan and Cody Unrau

Children's Story – Laura Voth

Morning Prayer –

Thank you, God for the solstice, for the longest night of the year which we've just had, and for the gradual increase of daylight that we'll begin to notice slowly. Help us to be attentive to you, particularly when we experience darkness. Darkness can be a time when we can rest and learn to trust you. It can also be a time when the darkness feels oppressive or overwhelming. We pray for your presence and that we may know your comfort.

O God, as we hear from some of your prophets this morning, help us to listen carefully. Help us to receive their challenges for our faith journey. Thank you for their voices and for what we learn from them.

We pray, O God, for your children close to home and around the world who suffer from violence, hunger or fear. This seems to be running rampant in our world. We believe this is counter to you wishes and your will for people. Give us wisdom to know when/where and how to help.

O Lord, we pray for those who may be struggling with colds or viruses or other health concerns. We pray for those with chronic pain or who have procedures coming up this week. Be present with your healing hand. We ask for wholeness and wellness to return.

We thank you, God, for these high, holy days each year to celebrate your incarnation on this earth. Clear our eyes and our hearts of the overwhelming consumerism and wrong priorities. We want to have grateful hearts and be your faithful disciples.

Be with us now through this worship service, this day, and into this special week as we remember and celebrate, again, the birth of Jesus into our world. Amen.

Prayer of Dedication – Giver of all gifts, all that we have and all that we are come from you. Accept these offerings that we return to you with gratitude and humility. May these gifts of money be used, through the church, in ways that are pleasing to you. Amen.

Message -- Luke 1:39-55 "The maiden Mary, not so mild"
Pastor Lois Harder

Have you ever thought about what it would be like to try to tell this story from the perspective of Elizabeth or Mary?

When I looked in the back of our hymnal for hymns as well as scripture references from this passage from Luke, I thought it was interesting that they had Mary's Song scripted so that it could be read responsively – by two or more people. I thought it might give us kind of an interesting perspective for Nathaniel to read a part and all the rest of us to read the other parts. That's NOT how we typically hear this passage! But reading it this way made me wonder how it would be to tell – and to hear – this story from Mary's perspective. (Pull scarf up, over my head.)

I came from what people called the “backwater” town of Nazareth in the Galilee. It was a tiny little town north of Jerusalem nestled down in a basin-like area, surrounded by hills. Pretty much everyone from Nazareth was poor. They were working people who mostly struggled for daily existence. It was kind of hard to get to and people didn't really have reasons to come to Nazareth.

But it wasn't any trouble for the angel to get there! He just appeared! I'll never forget that day, you can imagine. Well actually, it's kind of hard to imagine if you've never experienced it. Lots of people thought I was delusional, crazy or the worst – that I was lying. No one wanted to listen to or believe a young woman from Nazareth. I was a nobody.

Which, of course, was why it was so shocking that an angel would come to ME – with a message from God! The angel told me that I was favored of God... and that God was with me. I mean, I'm Jewish; of course God is *with* me; God is always with our people. But the thing about being favored of God... that meant that God would freely bestow something on me, that God would give something to me that I neither asked for nor could I provide it myself. That was a strange thing for the angel to say. I didn't know what that could mean! So, I was listening and I was curious and I was also really confused.

But then the angel went on, telling me not to be afraid and, again, that I had found favor with God. Not that my people had found favor with God, but me. Just me. I knew of other individuals in our long history that had been favored by God – Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Moses, Joseph... others. Oh! And not MY Joseph. No, no... our ancient forebears Jacob and Rachel's son, Joseph. Yeah, I should say, the only thing I really had going for me was that I was engaged to Joseph. Also of Nazareth, but his family was from the line of King David. So that was something.

But as I was saying, it didn't make any sense to me that the angel was telling me that I, singularly, had found favor with God. I knew the stories of those who had and God had done great, amazing things through them and their lives were very exciting buuuuuuuuu... their lives were also HARD!

And then the angel kept talking, giving instructions. Not only was I to not be afraid and not only had I (somehow?) found favor with God, but here was the favor. I would conceive a child. I would have a son. And I was to name him Jesus. And here's what the angel said about him... He would be great. He would be called the Son of the Most High. God would give to him the throne of David. He would reign over the house of Jacob forever. And there would be no end to his kingdom.

Now I was really confused and not really happy. I was engaged to Joseph, but we had not done what needed to be done in order to have a baby. I pointed that out to the angel and asked, “How can this be?” The angel said that the Holy Spirit would come upon me and the power of The Most High God would “overshadow” me. And because of that, this child would be holy and would be called the Son of God.

We were definitely in mysterious territory now. This was obviously way beyond me. El Shaddai, God Almighty was up to something big. This was clearly in the realm of the God of unfathomable surprises, doing something for the people that the people couldn't understand.

As if all of that wasn't enough yet, the angel went on and told me that my relative, Elizabeth who was without children and was old – past childbearing age – she and her husband Zechariah were also going to have a baby boy! The angel said she was already 6 months along and that NOTHING is impossible with God! (pause)

Well... all right then. There it was. I was young, I was poor, I was from Nazareth – people said nothing good can come out of Nazareth – I was engaged but not yet married, I'd been visited by an angel and our mysterious God was on the move. All right. I was willing. I was humbled. And I was still confused, but I said all right. “Here I am, the servant, a disciple of the Lord; let it be with me, just as you've said.” And when I'd said that the angel took off.

I knew I needed to go, straightaway to Elizabeth. But I'll tell you, that was a long journey! She lived nearly a hundred miles away, through hill country – it would take me at least a week to get there. I had to be tough and strong and determined to get there. And I was. And I did.

I went in to the house and greeted Elizabeth. When she heard my voice, she also felt the power of The Holy Spirit. She felt her baby jump! And she gave me a big 'ole blessing! She blessed ME, she blessed my baby and she blessed the strength of my faith. It was a beautiful, holy time between us. I learned that Zechariah had also had a celestial visitor, he had also been instructed to not be afraid – but he was terrified! He had been told that Elizabeth would have a baby boy and, like me, he was given the baby's name – John. Like me, Zechariah also questioned how this could be – since he and Elizabeth were both old!/? But poor Zechariah! He was silenced as a result of his question. Elizabeth and I spent a good, long time together – several months – and even though neither of us knew exactly what was happening or how, we shared a firm belief that God was in it and whatever God was doing, it was through us, but beyond us, bigger than us. I was so overwhelmed that I broke out into song.

I sang like a prophet. I sang like Hannah of old. The first words that came to me were the words of my own heart. They were personal words of gratitude and joy. I sang about MY soul and MY spirit, MY God and Savior. The generations will call ME blessed and I sang about the Mighty One who has done great things for ME.

There were some other emotions going on for me that were personal and intense too. I didn't sing about the dilemma that this situation presented for me. Instead, I sang about God's mercy. I didn't sing about the potential consequences of an unexpected and unaccounted -for pregnancy.

But instead, I sang about God's strength that scatters the proud and brings down the powerful. I didn't sing about the awkward, difficult and even dangerous moments that I knew might be coming. I sang out of my courage, my God-given strength of purpose and clarity. This was not some sweet sentimentality that I was expressing. It was a song of raw and costly faith.

Lest you're tempted to think of me as 'meek and mild' Mary, I sang about the leveling that happens when God takes action; the rising of the humble and the falling of the mighty; the filling of the hungry and the emptying of the rich. I sang the praises of God who empowers the lowly and disempowers those who have exalted themselves. I sang out the blessing of justice for those who are faithful and remember God's covenant. It was a sweet song of good news and comfort for "poor, backwater, nobody" people like me. But for some, my song sounded like an angry challenge, a prophetic warning.

I was following in the well-established tradition of the prophets one of whom was Micah – whose words you all read at the beginning of this service. Way back in the 8th century BCE, the superpowers of the world were battling and threatening and colonizing. Micah was faithfully and fearlessly crying out for God's people to trust in the shepherd who cares for his flock, the One who brings true security and safety to the earth because he is the One who brings peace with justice. The prophets have always reminded us of the horrors of war and the ultimate failure of the power grabbers.

Micah and the other prophets aren't fortune tellers; they're messengers of hope and warnings. The prophets extend invitations to remember and stay focused on God. In Micah's time and 8 centuries later, in the time when my Jesus was sent and now – in this current time, the world is disoriented, in turmoil and despair. The prophets have always called for God's king to be in charge – the one of peace, not conquest, the one who extends open-handed provision and care, not the one with a raised fist and harsh words. It seems likely that God's king will not come from a power center but from a backwater, nowhere.

The prophets have always known that this is the way of our God, to appear through the least, the last, the lowly, revealing through them the fullness of God's kingdom. It's the way of God to be surprising, shocking, to be searching for the faithful who will join in the prophet-songs and then let God's Spirit overshadow them. (scarf down)

In this season when we wait, again, for Jesus' birth what might the prophets be challenging us to consider as we look ahead? Our hymn of response gives us some good places to start thinking about that. Even if you don't sing, I encourage you to read the words along with the song and let them soak in for you.

The sending song, number 208, can be a reminder to us of the many women's voices in the Bible that call us to put aside our fear and live our faith. I hope we can listen closely to the prophets and have courage to join in their songs.

Resources:

Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1 Advent through Transfiguration, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor.

Believers Church Bible Commentary on Luke by Mary H. Schertz

Preaching Through the Christian Year, edited by Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker

Texts for Preaching; A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV, Year C, edited by Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, J. Clinton McCann, James D. Newsome

“In the Lectionary” by Nadia Stefko in December, 2024 issue of *The Christian Century*

Benediction – Go into the world now, like Mary... humble, courageous, faithful, filled with God’s Holy Spirit, alert to God’s surprises, ready to participate with God, singing your own Magnificat, rejoicing in God, Our Savior.