

"NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD"  
 (Closing the Distance Between Us)  
 December 13, 2020 Advent Three  
 York Center Church of the Brethren  
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Where did we ever get the idea that Christmas is for children? Santa and gifts, yes. But the birth of Jesus? We certainly don't get that idea from reading scripture. The song we just heard, called the Magnificat, is Mary's rebel song about how her son Jesus will overthrow the power structures of her world. It is a protest song. She does not sing a lullaby. She sings a dangerous song of revolution where she claims that Jesus is King and Herod is not. Words that could have gotten her killed in those days.

So many stories and paintings portray Mary in meek obedience, in submissive surrender to God, as if she is weak and unable to think for herself. Why doesn't anyone speak of her courage? Why doesn't anyone speak of her wisdom? She is not a passive bystander in God's extraordinary and ridiculous plan. She is not a surrogate. She is not simply a gestational vessel whose purpose is to give birth and then step aside.

She steps forward as an active participant. She is invited to be the key player in God's holy invasion of the world, and she says, "Yes" to the invitation. Think about this for a moment. This teenager will be **the** most important human influence in the life of the coming Savior of the world.

*"Luke presents Mary not as a goddess, nor a stiff statue gathering cobwebs in a musty cathedral, not a plastic figurine molded with a sweet and innocent expression to sit lifeless in a coffee table creche. Luke's Mary is a genuine example of faith acted out in discipleship." (1)*

Mary is no delicate little flower overcome with the audacity of such a scandalous invitation. This young woman, once she gets over the initial shock of Gabriel's message, willingly takes her place as God's radical prophet.

At that moment of saying, *"Here I am, the servant of God, let it be with me according to your word,"* she likely had no idea of what was ahead of her. How could she? But this is what amazes me- even though she didn't know everything, she knew enough about God, and she trusted God enough to say, "Yes."

She had no idea why God chose her in the first place. Luke doesn't give us any information about why she was chosen. The Gospel of Matthew tells us more about Joseph than Luke does about Mary. What this tells us is that if God chose Mary, God could choose anyone. Even you. Even me.

By agreeing to God's outrageous plan Mary became "Theotokos," the God-bearer. She trusted God and decided to take part in a plan that she did not choose, doing things she did not know how to do, for reasons she did not fully understand.

I probably share this quote from Barbara Brown Taylor every year, but I just love this. In a sermon called, "Mothers of God," she wrote: *"Mary chose to take part in a thrilling and dangerous scheme with no script and no guarantees. She agreed to smuggle God into the world inside her own body."* (2)

That, for me, is the essence of the incarnation; God's ultimate plan to close the distance between us. God chose to enter into our world in the most intimate and vulnerable way possible- as a newborn baby. God arrived on our doorstep needy and helpless, just like every other human being ever born.

At the end of Gabriel's invitation to Mary, just to prove that nothing is impossible with God, he told her that her elderly cousin was six months pregnant. Elizabeth, in her nineties, was having a baby! Mary quickly packed a bag and set off on a dangerous 100 mile journey.

When she arrived, Elizabeth greeted her with a blessing, acknowledging Mary's miraculous pregnancy. That is when Mary burst into song. *"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!"*

In this beautiful song, Mary powerfully interprets the birth of her son as the triumph of God for God's people. What God has done for Mary, God will do for others who are lowly, poor, and oppressed. She basically sings her son's job description as the Messiah. Almost every word is a quotation from the Hebrew scripture she learned as a child. These old words suddenly take on new meaning and new life as original as the new being in her womb. She sings of her dawning realization of what her baby will mean to the world. And what it will mean is God's upheaval of a world gone wrong.

Just three chapters later in Luke's Gospel, when he records Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth, we hear an echo of Mary's song. *"The Spirit of God is upon me: because the Most High has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim freedom to those held captive, recovery of sight to the blind and release to those in prison- to proclaim the year of God's favor."* (Luke 4:18-19)

Where do you think Jesus learned that subversive message? Karoline Lewis explains. *"His understanding of his purpose for his ministry restates his mother's understanding of God's working in her life. Jesus senses the essence of his ministry because he learned it from Mary. Jesus isn't just making stuff up. He's giving voice to how he grew up. He's articulating what he's been taught. He's known this from the beginning. It's what his mother preached. It's what his mother lived. It's what his mother taught him to be. It's how his mother interpreted scripture.*

*It's what his mother shared about who she knew God to be. It's what her life of faith embodied. Jesus can witness to the God he knows because he heard his mother give witness to the God she knew. This is how she talked and how she lived. This is how she helped Jesus to see the world. It was how she helped him to see who he was and who he needed to be."*

Mary and Jesus lived in a time when the Empire of Rome ruthlessly governed the entire known world. The emperor was called "Lord" and "son of god." Anyone who said otherwise was labeled an enemy of the state and likely to be arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and killed. Defying the Empire was dangerous and deadly. Yet Mary did it anyway.

In his essay, "Why Do Christians Protest?" Benjamin Wayman wrote, *"The people of God are a people of protest. Most Christians today don't think this way. Rather than seeing protest as an exception to the rule of normal life, Christians in America should see protest as part of our necessary proclamatory action that Jesus is Lord in a world that lives otherwise.*

*The Bible gives Christians good reason to embrace protest as an ordinary form of Christian action. Scripture records how God's people protested oppressive rulers, unjust laws, degrading social systems, exploitative practices, and government enforced idolatry. The people of God protested a world that fell short of God's shalom.*

Wayman believes that Jesus is God's perfect protest. *"In his birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus' life was a peaceful protest to a world bent on war. The incarnation is God's protest against the grip of sin, the terror of death, and the reign of evil. Jesus' life showed the world an alternative to the power politics that always end in violence and death. In a world that crucified the God who came in protest, our faithful imitation of Jesus means becoming a people of protest."* (3)

"Protest" is defined as an act of objecting or a gesture of disapproval. Our lives as Christians are to be lives of protest against those who seek their own power over God's power; protest against those who harm the weak and oppress the vulnerable.

We are called to be passionately concerned with the people and the world God has created. Concern for the common good is to be our focus. It isn't about a particular political party- it is about how the world is run. Is it God-centered or not? We are called to create a world that adheres to God's reign; to God's power. God's power threatens the human powers that be, those are the powers that call us to place our loyalty and our faith in them. And often punish us if we don't.

This season of Advent is the perfect time to remind us of the danger and the beauty of the birth of Jesus. Christmas is the time to celebrate the birth of a baby, but it also marks the birth of a political movement. It marks the time when God came to earth to be with us as one of us because things were not as they should be. And they still aren't.

As those who follow Jesus, we are called to protest the reality that all is not well in our world. Like young Mary, we are called to announce the good news that the reign of God is near. In God's reign the hungry are fed, the poor are blessed, enemies are loved, captives are released, the blind are healed, the homeless are housed, and the oppressed are set free. Until this reign becomes reality we are called to protest- to speak up, to stand out, to put our faith into action.

If we call ourselves Christians, we do not have the luxury of looking the other way. We do not have the privilege of thinking "it isn't about us." We can't just stop by the manger to admire the baby and then get on with our lives as if nothing has happened. Once we meet Jesus, we are expected to live our lives as his witnesses. We are expected to reach out to the unreachable, to love the unlovable. We are expected to overturn the

tables of our human power structures when they become self-serving instead of God-serving.

I hear the criticisms that the church is not supposed to be "political." But according to scripture, that is all we are supposed to be. Mary's song should be our first clue. Pastor Isaac Villegas writes, *"Mary prophesies a new political arrangement, which will involve the abolition of the old systems of power. She sings her song in remembrance of God's mercy which shatters the institutions of injustice that threaten and imprison."*

She sings of hope for a society different from the one she lives in. She calls for a reconstructed society, a world where she and her people will no longer be oppressed and abused. She announces the remaking of the world.

Mary was invited to be a crucial instrument in God's plan to save humanity and change the world. She reminds us once again that when we allow God to be born in us there is no telling what will happen. She calls us to believe the impossible possibilities of God.

Our very act of worship today is an act of protest- as we worship our God- we protest everything that is not of God, everything that stands against God's intention for this extraordinary creation.

We protest the mounting numbers of Covid deaths and the economic, psychological, physical, and spiritual costs so many have suffered.

We protest the reality of racism and White Supremacy that has grown like a cancer in our nation and around the world.

We protest a church that protects white fragility.

We protest violence, corruption, poverty, and all human institutions that do not seek the common good.

You know, this isn't the sermon I wanted to preach this morning. I love the season of Advent, but I am exhausted; exhausted by the great needs in our world, by the needs and concerns in our congregation. I am exhausted by conflict, by fear, by division, and by hatred. I just wanted to help Mary get the nursery ready. Maybe fold some diapers and find a soft blanket for the manger. I just wanted to sit with Mary and Joseph as they ponder this new life they are expecting.

But Mary's song wouldn't let me do that.

Because it is into our world, into **this** world, this broken, fallible, corrupt, and yet exquisitely beautiful world that this courageous young woman's song comes yet again. She reminds us that God offers to this unworthy world an impossible gift wrapped in human flesh, closing the distance between us in love, re-ordering the world's priorities.

As we continue our journey through Advent to Christmas, how will God's impossible possibilities find life within us?

How will we be instruments of God's impossibilities?

How will we live our lives as a protest to a world that harms God's beloved children?

What of God will we allow to be born in us?

Amen.

*End Notes:*

- 1- "Mary as a Role Model," Byron L. Rohrig, *THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY*, November 26, 2986. P. 1062.
- 2- "Mothers of God," Barbara Brown Taylor, from *GOSPEL MEDICINE*, Cowley, 1995. P. 150.
- 3- "Why Do Christians Protest?" Benjamin D. Wayman, *THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY*, November 4, 2020. Pp. 24-25.