

Sermon for Advent 4C
Sunday, December 19, 2021
“Fear not; God is about to turn things upside down.”

Texts: Luke 1:39-55; 1 Samuel 2:1-10

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Fear not!” Those were Gabriel’s words to Mary when he announced to her that she would bear and conceive a son who would be the Savior of all humankind. “Fear not!” were the words Gabriel said to Zechariah when he foretold the birth of John, who would be the one born to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah. The world 2,000 years ago was a fearful, chaotic place, and the world is still frightening and often tumultuous or confusing. Life itself is full of surprises good and bad. We encounter all kinds of changes in our lives—some we plan but most we do not. The message then and the message now has always been: Fear not! God is about to turn everything upside down.

Today’s Gospel story takes us to a Judean town in the hill country. Centuries of pilgrimage and tradition place Mary’s visit to her relative Elizabeth in a town about 4½ miles SW of Jerusalem known today as Ein Karem. It would have been a day’s journey from the temple in Jerusalem. But Mary lived in Nazareth, some 90 miles to the north in the region of Galilee. Mary’s hasty journey to visit her cousin would have taken several days, perhaps up to a week, to complete. She undoubtedly traveled with more than a small carry-on suitcase; a journey of this magnitude would have required clothing and supplies to last for several weeks at least. Mary’s trip was no trivial undertaking, and the story today begins with that tender encounter between two cousins.

This story is one of miracles and the reality of the unlikely. Scripture tells us that when the Annunciation took place, when Gabriel told Mary that she would bear a son, Elizabeth was already six-months pregnant with John the Baptist. Elizabeth was an old woman by then; she had probably long given up the possibility of bearing children, and yet God defied expectation and chose her to be the mother of the forerunner of the Messiah. Her being pregnant at such an old age probably surprised her and everyone in her community, but with God all things are possible. Then, there’s Mary, a teenage girl, not yet married, a virgin, who found such favor with God that he chose her to be the vessel by which he would become incarnate in the world. God chose her, and she said, “Be it done unto me according to thy word.” She humbly accepted God’s purpose for her, even though it would have serious consequences for her in her community. No doubt, her pregnancy was a surprise to everyone! We can only imagine the things people said when they found out. We know that an angel appeared to Joseph to reassure him that he needed to marry Mary at once, so as to protect her from shame and being shunned from the community. There they were; two ordinary women who accepted God’s extraordinary purpose for them.

And when she greeted Elizabeth, the text says that Elizabeth's child leaped in her womb. Have you ever thought about that particular moment? Any woman who has borne a living child has experienced the baby kicking in her stomach. In fact, every female mammal experiences the kicking of her baby at some point during the pregnancy, especially as the birth day gets closer. It is a precious moment the first time it happens, perhaps uncomfortable as the baby grows, yet it offers reassurance that the growing fetus is alive and hopefully well. But the gospel text doesn't say the baby kicked inside Elizabeth, it says he leaped. There's something up with this statement. Seems to me that what happened was more than just a kick. I mean, why would Luke comment on such a common occurrence of pregnancy? In a normal pregnancy, the woman should feel fetal movement sometime between Week 16 and 25 of the pregnancy. Maybe since it was Elizabeth's first child it was the baby's first kick and she interpreted it as a leap; or, maybe it was more like a joyous dance inside. All we know is that something happened beyond Elizabeth's expectation when she welcomed her cousin Mary that day.

And then we hear the glorious words of Mary's *Magnificat*. We call it that because of the first few words in the Latin version: *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*. "My soul magnifies the Lord." It is a song in which Mary sings praise to God for the great thing he is doing through her, but she also praises for the ways that God has defied expectations and turned the world upside down. But Mary's song echoes a much older and similar song of praise to God. Any good Jew, including Mary, would have heard the story of Samuel and would have heard the song that Hannah sang after her prayers were heard by God and she was to bear a child. 1 Samuel 2:1-10 says:

Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. "There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. "He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most

High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed.”

Both the Song of Hannah and the Song of Mary speak of God’s power to turn things upside down, to bring down the mighty and lift up the lowly, to change things from the way things are to the way things ought to be.

Now what’s interesting about Mary’s song is that, where Hannah’s song praises God for what he is doing or going to do, Mary’s song speaks to what God has already done. “He has shown the strength of his arm. He has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has come to the help of his servant Israel, for he has remembered his promise of mercy, the promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham, and his children for ever.” Mary’s song says it’s a done deal—not just now, but for all time! God has already turned the world upside down and will continue to do so well into the future. The birth of Jesus will be the birth of the Messiah who will defy expectations and turn the world upside down, thereby changing it for all time.

This message is so relevant for us today. All you have to do is turn on the TV or open your internet browser. There is so much chaos and trouble going on in our nation and in the world. Violence and oppression, poverty and abuse by the rich and powerful, disease, famine, natural disaster. We don’t even have to turn on the TV or the internet, really. We confront all kinds of changes. Change scares us; we’d rather keep things as they are and stay where we are comfortable. But we are always faced with the challenge of change. There’s plenty of stuff going on in our own lives to know that we are in need of a Messiah, a Savior who will defy expectations and turn our world upside down. And in this world, we all have a purpose and a role in God’s great plan. Sometimes our actions or the things we do in our lives make a large and visible impact; for some, their actions even make them famous or well-known in the world. For most of us, we don’t always know the extent of the impact of our actions, but somehow we all make a small difference and complete a small piece of divine puzzle that is God’s plan. When we say, “Yes!” to God, we agree to participate in something that will exceed our imaginations and our expectations. Even if God’s call to us seems impossible, unattainable, or even ridiculous, we need to trust God’s wisdom to know what’s best for us.

So, as the season of Advent comes to an end and we prepare to receive the light of God in his Incarnation, in the Nativity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, may we also hold on to the confidence that God will continue to defy our expectations, renew our lives, restore our health, satisfy our hunger, quench our thirst, strengthen us to overcome those persons or things that bring us down, relieve our fears, comfort us in our moments of loneliness and loss, and turn our world upside down. May we trust that

God can change the way things are to the way things ought to be, using us as his chosen vessels to make it happen. God has given us what it takes. Let us rejoice and fear not! Amen.

Resources

“Ein Karem,” <http://www.seetheholyland.net/ein-karem/>

“Nazareth,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazareth#Geography>

“Feeling your baby kick,” <http://www.webmd.com/baby/fetal-movement-feeling-baby-kick>