

How Can This Be?

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Luke 1:26-38 Luke 1:47-55

Advent IV

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How can this be?

How can this be ... that we can support perpetual war in this nation as well as an astronomical military budget ... and then still claim we are welcoming the Prince of Peace at Christmas?

How can this be ... that we can take away medical care from 9 million American children ... when the God we profess to worship calls for us to care for the most vulnerable?

How can this be ... that our excesses and our greed are destroying the very viability of our planet ... and yet we pray to God ... the creator of all that is?

How can this be ... that our new tax bill will give more money to those who already have the most ... when our God desires the beloved community ... where everyone sits at a level table?

How can any of this be ... in a nation ... among people ... that continue to claim we are Christian?

And then ... how can this be ... that God calls us ... expects us ... you and me right along with Mary ... to move into all that darkness and hopelessness in our world ... and shine our light ... to move into all that darkness ... and bear God into the world?

How can this be ... that we are called to offer hope in these hopeless times?

On this fourth Sunday in Advent ... Luke's story is all about Mary ... the only gospel that gives us this much of her story ... the only gospel that tells us very much at all about this young peasant girl ... and her song of revolution and redistribution.

During the previous weeks of Advent ... John the Baptizer has preached ... and Isaiah has prophesied ... but today it's Mary that sings ... it is Mary that is preaching ... it is Mary who gives us this prophetic, radical statement about her God.

In today's text ... it all begins when an angel appears to Mary and tells her that she will bear a special child ... she will bear the son of the most high. At first Mary asks, "How can this be?" ... and then she tells the angel: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word."

And then she travels to her cousin Elizabeth's house ... and there ... the author of Luke's Gospel tells us in a continuation of the text Brad read for us ... that she sings this song we call the Magnificat ... a song that is just

as political ... is just as prophetic ... as anything we have read during this advent season ... just as political and just as prophetic ... as the words of Isaiah ... as the words of John the Baptizer.

Like them ... Mary also speaks of the great reversal that is both coming ... and has already come ... when she says that God is in the process of turning the world right-side up ... in the midst of changing the world to a place where the rich will go away empty and the poor will be filled up.

Mary is speaking of that same theme of distributive justice that we talked about last week ... that kind of justice that is the heartbeat of the Hebrew Bible ... that continues here ... with Mary's assurance that God not only wants this reversal ... but is the cause of this reversal ... and that despite all the evidence to the contrary ... this reversal is already taking place.

Make no mistake this morning ... Mary ... like all the prophets before her ... speaks of a God ***who is biased*** ... a God who is on the side of peace and justice ... who is on the side of children and the most vulnerable.

So this morning ... let's not get too hung up on the literal facts of this story. Let's set aside those questions we wrestle with ... questions like "Was Mary a virgin or not?" ... and ... "Who was there to record her song?" ... or ... "Did an angel really appear to her?"

And then instead ... let's lift up what Mary sings ... to a story that is deeply true ... so we can focus on what the story *means*. Perhaps the author of this gospel told this story because he wanted to blur the lines for us ... blur the lines of what we think is possible ... and what we think is impossible.

Maybe the author of this gospel wanted us to really imagine that a time would come ... when our weapons would be beaten into plowshares.

Imagine a time when all children have what they need.

Imagine a time when the powerful lie down with the weak.

Imagine a time when God's justice flows like a river.

Maybe this story's purpose is to challenge us to dare that kind of hope ... and then dare to align our lives around it.

Perhaps the author is telling a story of what might happen when an angel appears to us and basically says ... as Gabriel does to Mary ... "Are you in or are you out? ... I need to know ... because if you are in ... then God has plans for you."

Mary ... of course ... had no credentials ... no polished resume that God should have noticed her ... she offered no special skill that should have grabbed God's attention. And yet God chooses her in Luke's story. And that is really the theme of Luke's Gospel ... and the whole Bible as well ... all the way down to us.

We are all a motley crew ... there is no reason God should chose us ... like Mary or those lowly shepherds ... we come with very little to boast about ... but still God chooses us as well.

So this morning ... can you see yourself as one who is also being asked to give birth to God-with-Us ... asked to be a dwelling place for God ... can you imagine that you are the one who is waiting with expectation for the new thing God will do ... the one who believes ... against all the odds ... that that reversal will come?

Because as the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart wrote in the 14th century: “We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me ... if this eternal birth of the divine takes place unceasingly ... but does not take place with me?”

Perhaps that’s why the author of Luke’s gospel is telling us this story this morning ... because it’s a story of what should be happening in all of our lives this Advent season.

During the two years he was imprisoned by the Nazis before his death ... the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was able to smuggle some of his writings out of his prison cell ... and in a part of those writings he speaks about that very cell ... and he compares it to this season of Advent.

“It is,” Bonhoeffer wrote of his prison cell, “a place where one waits and hopes ... a place that is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside. That,” he adds, “is not a bad picture of Advent.”

As I have been thinking about Bonhoeffer’s words ... laying them down next to Mary’s story ... perhaps this is a way to describe Advent from God’s perspective, too.

Here is God ... waiting to be born ... not just into the world once a long time ago ... but into our lives today ... God with us ... Emmanuel ... completely dependent on the fact that the door has to be opened from the other side ... the entry has to be created by us.

In other words ... incarnation requires our willingness to embody it ... to give it birth.

Mary could have said “no” ... and maybe a thousand other young girls would have.

But she doesn’t ... and her “How can this be?” becomes “Let it be with me.”

Today we might say ... it was different for Mary ... unlike us she was able to say yes because she was too young to know what she was doing ... because she had nothing to lose ... because she was poor and powerless and naïve ... of course she said yes.

Or we might kid ourselves into thinking it was all pre-arranged ... that she was some super human ... who would never say no. But if we think that ... we should remember ... Luke’s Mary wasn’t some Jewish mystic sitting around waiting for God’s call ... no matter what the church has tried to make of her over the centuries.

Rather she was just a young peasant girl living a life filled with poverty and oppression ... and she still said yes ... yes, I agree to be part of things ... yes, I agree to allow love to grow within me ... yes, I am willing to buy into God’s vision ... no matter what that means.

And through the telling of Mary's story ... the author of this Gospel gives us a radical reversal ... a taste of the world God will bring into being ... and so Mary sings her song.

God comes to us too ... while we are just living our normal, ordinary lives. God comes to every single one of us ... calls us many times throughout our lives ... calls us over and over again to say "yes" ... yes, I will bear love into the world ... yes, I will help to bring about that radical reversal Mary sings about ... where the poor are lifted up ... where the rich are sent away empty.

But like Mary we always have a choice ... we can say "yes" or we can say "no" ... we are free to open that door and let God in ... or not. We have the freedom to say, "No, not this year" ... "Not this time" ... "Maybe another day" ... "I'm too busy" ... "I have to put away a little more money first" ... "What would my family think?" ... "This will be a major inconvenience in my life." ... "Thanks for the offer ... but I don't think so."

We can always say "no" to the offer ... "no" to God's plan ... "no" to incarnation in our lives. Because as I've said in this pulpit before ... our "yes" doesn't mean much ... if we don't have that freedom to say "no."

God is always calling us to continue to sing Mary's song ... about what God has done ... what God is doing ... and what God plans to do in the future ... calling us to keep proclaiming Mary's God ... and Isaiah's God ... and the Baptizer's God ... this God who has a bias for those on the margins ... calling us to sing and proclaim and live a different way ... but whether we do or not ... is up to us.

As we come to the end of Advent ... come to the end of this period of expectation and waiting ... we need to be clear with ourselves ... about what it is we are actually waiting for ... and if sometimes ... we aren't more comfortable with the waiting ... than with the possibility of incarnation.

So ... please remember as you gather with family and friends ... and you open your presents and share a meal ... Christmas really is not a sweet story ... rather ... Christmas is God intervening in human darkness and hopelessness ... Christmas is God offering a light to those walking in deep darkness.

We dare not miss the parallels between that world and our own.

How can this be? How can any of this be? That's the question Advent asks. Christmas answers ... "Let it be." Amen.