

**Dec. 20, 2020 -- (Advent 4, Jesus' Birth Announced)**

**Sermon Text – Luke 1:26-45 [46-56]**

- Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." ...When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. -

**It could really have been much worse. Not that things like that didn't happen. Even in Nazareth, young girls sometimes got pregnant and became unwed mothers. But with Mary, this was a delicate situation, so God has sent an angelic messenger to let her know she was part of the plan. One preacher has proposed that their conversation could have gone something like this: "Knock, knock. 'Come in.' 'Hello, Mary.' 'Hello.' 'I'm Gabriel, the archangel.' 'Mm-hmm.' 'God wants to know, 'Will you be the mother of his Son?' And she says, 'Whhh-what? You know in this village, you can't [really do anything] without [people] knowing [all about it], and you're asking me to be what? An unmarried mother? No, no, no, no, no. I'm a decent girl. Try next door.'" And that could have been a real problem. Who knows how the girl next door would have responded? She could have said, "No way. I don't care if you are some kind of a big deal angel. I'm not doing something like that. It's just not going to happen." But that's not Mary. Mary is different. Mary is full of faith. Mary finds a way to trust. Mary says, "Okay. If you think that's a good idea, then I'm in. But I don't see how it's going to happen. I've never even been with a man, so it's not really possible." And then Gabriel comes back with, "Don't worry about that. God's got it all under control. The Holy Spirit will make it happen. And just so you know, your elderly cousin, Elizabeth, who thought she would never have a child, is already six months pregnant. So, you see, nothing is impossible with God." And Mary agrees. "Here am I," she says, "let it be according to your word."**

**Dr. Eric Beretto, former Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary and now at Princeton, says that "after a year dominated by a pandemic, protests and politics," he wonders about how we will hear these stories. One thing he thinks we should be especially attuned to is the vulnerability that is on display. God's choice to enter into the world as little baby to be present with God's people in a new way is a risky busi-**

ness. The decision to involve humans opens God's plan to the possibility of failure. Mary didn't have to say, "Yes." If she didn't, we might presume there was a Plan B, but one suspects that God would choose to ask the best candidate first. A "No" from Mary, and we would have been on to a plan that was less than optimal. The fact that she says "Yes" is the reason that we Lutherans have so admired her down through the years. She is a person of supreme faith. She accepts the plan and agrees to become the mother of God. That's pretty astounding. And think about the vulnerability of Elizabeth, the pain she has endured living with her frustration over having no children into her old age, only to be subjected to public ridicule and mockery over the fact that she and Zachariah have been so foolish as to become pregnant in their old age. That would not be easy; yet, she has become the proof of God's power to transform the lives of even those who have lost hope. And think about the unborn children in this story, growing inside their mother's wombs. There is no more dependent time in a person's life than those first months of formation. And still, here they are in this story, aware and active, making their presence known, John jumping for joy at the chance to meet his Savior, and Jesus, impressing his importance upon Elizabeth, that she should interpret John's kick as an indication that Mary has come to her as the mother of her Lord. If you think back just a few weeks, when we were reading from the prophet Joel, he had said on behalf of the Lord, "Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy..." Here are the first prophecies of Luke's gospel. They are delivered, not by the rich and powerful, or the finest and foremost of the religious leaders, but by two pregnant women in unusual circumstances and an unborn child, inspired to respond to their visit with some enthusiastic gymnastics.

The angel had told Mary concerning her son, "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." This is clearly a reference to God's promise to David, which we read about in our trip through the Old Testament. David's family was to rule forever. But that all came to an end with the Babylonians. For more that 500 years, there was no king from the line of David to rule over Israel. Now, the child to be born, whose potential step-father is from "the house of David," will put an end to all that. This shows still another vulnerability. The plan is subject to the foibles of human relationships. Matthew will solve this in his gospel by relating the story of another visit by Gabriel, this time to a sleeping Joseph. Luke just leaves it hanging on the notion that "for God nothing will be impossible."

But the most important reference to vulnerability comes from Mary's prophetic

song, the Magnificat, which she sings in response to her visit with Elizabeth. Echoing the words of Hannah in the Old Testament, Mary clearly points to a reversal of priorities among the peoples of the world. "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." For Mary, it is already an accomplished fact. The promise of good news to the hurting people of the world, only pointed to by Isaiah, in our text from last week, now explodes into a report of a done deal. The child is about to be born and the world is about to change. This is what the presence of God in Jesus means to the rest of God's people. It is the hope for the hopeless, strength for the weak, comfort for the sad and provision for those who must do without. It will be like manna in the wilderness, mercy in the face of all odds, and might to endure in the midst of the darkest hours. Mary's promised child will be the fulfillment of all those themes we have explored as we have moved through our reading of the Old Testament.

We probably don't need Dr. Beretto to tell us that this Christmas will be different from any other that we have ever experienced. The fact that many of us are already abstaining from parties, choosing not to gather together with members of the family, and planning to worship on Christmas Eve dressed in our pajamas with a cup of hot chocolate or a glass of eggnog in our hand is enough to tip us off that something is not the same. The fact that we have learned to wear masks in public, to social distance and to wash our hands and sanitize just about everything all the time is enough to let us know that something has changed. And the fact that we have learned to use things like Zoom, or Facetime, or Skype, or Meet or Teams to hold our classes, create community and be together with family and friends is enough to make us aware that this is a different time than it was even one year ago. But here's the thing. The birth of the child to come, which caused such a stir in Mary's life, and that of her cousin Elizabeth, and unborn John the Baptist, has always been for a people who were suffering, living under harsh conditions, oppressed by powers over which they had little or no control and vulnerable to the dominance of life's great difficulties. The promise of a child brings with it waiting, and hoping, and dreaming and anticipation of good things to come. May it be so for us, as we prepare to, once again, celebrate that promised birth.

Amen.