

Micah 5:2-5a
Luke 1:39-56

CONTAGIOUS LOVE

In an Advent sermon, Martin Luther said that when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, three miracles occurred: God became man, a virgin conceived, and Mary believed. The greatest of the Christmas miracles, said Luther, was that Mary believed. Despite it all, Mary believed and she sang.

Just prior to the Gospel passage this morning, Mary had learned from the angel Gabriel that she would soon conceive and bear a son, Jesus, who would be called the Son of the Most High. We can well understand that Mary's initial response was one of shock and disbelief. "How can this be," Mary protested, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel Gabriel's explanation that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you," was a mysterious and vague answer that surely didn't satisfy all of the questions in Mary's mind. However, Mary was given a sign that her elderly cousin, Elizabeth, who had been barren, was due to give birth to a son in three months. Then, the angel Gabriel reminded Mary, "Nothing will be impossible with God." Although Mary must have had many questions and a great deal of uncertainty still swirling around inside of her, she had seen and heard enough to be able to say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Mary believed. And, she acted on her belief by going to see Elizabeth in the Judean hill country. What kind of reception would Elizabeth give Mary? Would she cluck her tongue and judge Mary harshly for being pregnant prior to marriage? Would she despise Mary's youth and say out loud, "I don't know what's gotten into young people today, disregarding all of the rules and misbehaving!" Would Elizabeth have a superior attitude and make Mary feel very small, indeed?

The answer is: "None of the above!" When Mary greeted her, Elizabeth was filled with both the Holy Spirit and with joy. Instead of belittling Mary, Elizabeth blessed her and the holy child she bore within her womb. Elizabeth referred to Mary's child as "my Lord," and, by doing so, Elizabeth made the second Christian confession following Mary's "Let it be with me" as the first confession of faith. Elizabeth blessed Mary once more for trusting in the angel's message and in God's plan for her life and the life of the world. In grateful response to both God's grace and Elizabeth's affirmation of Mary's role in the divine scheme of things, Mary burst forth into song.

Now then, what can we glean from this passage of Scripture that is relevant for our lives and our faith this morning and as we prepare to step over the threshold of the new year? As I have listened to the text, I hear at least three possibilities for us to consider and act upon.

First of all, what was true then is still true today and next year and beyond: "Nothing will be impossible with God." This affirmation of faith in God and God's abilities is grounded in the knowledge of what God has done in the past, and it informs our belief in the present and our hope for the future. God can do anything to achieve the divine plan; nothing is impossible. When Israel was held captive in Egypt, the Lord God brought them out of Egypt, led them through the wilderness, and delivered them into a land of promise. When Israel was conquered and led into exile far away in Babylon, through a chain of events beginning with King Cyrus of Persia, the Lord God did the impossible and brought the Israelites back home. In time, in the fullness of time, God did the

unthinkable and took on human flesh and became one of us, one with us and for us. Some thirty years later, God, in Jesus Christ died for us on the cross and rose again for us so that we could be liberated from our sins and have eternal life now and forever. With this God, nothing but nothing is impossible!

Think back on your own lives. Recall, if you can, a dark, bleak time when you were at wit's end and didn't know how your problem could ever be resolved. Perhaps you were in a financial crisis; or a loved one had died and you didn't think you could go on; or you were in a difficult situation and couldn't see any viable options; or you were in a dead-end relationship and both the present and the future were filled with uncertainties. And here you are today; either the problems are gone or they are still around but you have learned to cope with them and even grow forward in spite of them. How did you get from there to here? Did you do it all on your own? Or were you aware that the God of Exodus and Easter, of Elizabeth and Mary, was at work in order to bring about the divine purpose in your life? And, do you realize by now that nothing is too big for or will be impossible with God?

If you believe that God took on human flesh to be with us, and took on the sins of the world on the cross so that we could be made right with God, and raised Jesus from the dead, then there is absolutely nothing in your life that is impossible for this God! So, be ready and be filled with belief that somehow, somehow, God will act on your behalf.

Secondly, we would do well to remember that Mary's song is as pertinent today and tomorrow as when it was first sung. God is still in the business of turning our sinful lives upside down so that our values are realigned with God's will, and thus, we finally stand right-side up! Just as God acted and overturned Mary's life, God will go and do likewise to all others until we are in harmony with the divine purpose. Mary who was troubled is comforted; Mary who was afraid is now strong; Mary who was alone is now with family; and Mary who was in despair is now filled with joy. By the same token, the proud will be scattered and the mighty will be put down from their thrones while all those of low degree will be exalted; the hungry are filled while the rich are sent away empty.

If we rely on our own strength, our strength can get in God's way whereas our weakness makes room for and welcomes God and the help that God brings. If we come before God empty, God will fill us. If we come before God full - full of ourselves, of our possessions, of our self-importance - God will empty us. Then, when God finally has his way with us, God can go to work on us and transform us into new creations in Christ.

Christmas time always reminds me of the German pastor, Helmut Thielicke, who had an old photograph, which he always kept near his desk. It was a snapshot of a nativity pageant. A group of rather grizzled looking men are wearing white robes and holding candles in their rough hands. Another group of men is kneeling before them, feigning terror. It is clear that they are supposed to be the angels, speaking to the fearful shepherds. Why this photograph in the pastor's study? Thielicke explains that it was taken in prison. The men in the scene were all convicts, hardened criminals whose lives had been transformed by Christ. There murderers and thugs were dressed like angels. For Thielicke, it was a beautiful parable, a visible reminder of the power of God to overcome human sin.

And, if Christ Jesus can transform those hardened criminals just imagine what changes he can make within us. If we come before him empty-handed and in need of grace (instead of being self-sufficient), our Lord will fill us to overflowing and enable us to grow more and more as his disciples until we look and act just like him.

Thirdly, it's the contagious love of God that reached out to Mary and, in turn, took Mary on a journey to see her kinswoman, Elizabeth. Down through the ages, and across many countries, from one generation to another, God's contagious love has been given to us; and, we are called to pass the holy love on to others.

A church youth group went on their annual mission trip to the inner city. Every morning and evening they would gather around a simple candle and worship in the basement of an inner-city church. One of their favorite songs was a "round" using the words of Mary's Magnificat. Half the group would begin, "My soul magnifies the Lord..." Then, the other half would echo back with the same words "My soul magnifies the Lord..." and thus continue through Mary's song. The youth came to love the song so much, they would sing it not only in their morning and evening worship times, but in the various places they were in mission: places like downtown soup kitchens, used-clothing stores, and food pantries for the poor. While they were setting up tables and chairs they would sing, "My soul magnifies the Lord..." And while they were folding clothes some would echo back, "My soul magnifies the Lord..." There is something about Mary's song that asks for it to be continued. (Gunter Wasserberg, Biblical Preaching Journal, Fall 2000, p. 33) God's love is contagious. As we have been blessed over and over again, let us be ongoing blessings to and for others. Let us join in on Mary's song. Let us do more than sing with our lips; let us sing with our hands, our hearts, our minds, our money, our time and abilities, with our entire lives.

Remember this miracle: Mary believed; and because she believed, she sang for all she was worth. Let us blend our voices with hers and spread God's contagious love all around - to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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