

Fourth Sunday Advent (December 20, 2015)
Scripture passages: Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-55

“Blessed is she who believed!”

Ry O. Siggelkow

Our New Testament passage for today, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, comes from the Gospel of Luke. The narratives that describe the birth of Jesus are found only in Luke and Matthew, and though there are considerable differences between the two accounts, this morning I will only focus on the Lukan narrative, and on Luke’s portrayal of Mary in particular. Luke tells us that Mary has set out in haste to a Judean town in the hill country to meet Elizabeth and Zechariah. As soon as Elizabeth hears Mary at the door, the child in her womb “*leaps*”—this, Luke informs us, is a sign of her being filled with the Holy Spirit. You may recall that earlier in the chapter, the angel Gabriel who appears to Mary, first appeared to the priest, Zechariah, informing him that his wife, Elizabeth, who is described as old and barren yet good and righteous, would bear a child, who is to be named John (John the Baptist). This one will bring about deliverance for the people. The same angel appears to Mary, who is described by Luke as a young woman engaged to a man named Joseph, informing her that she will conceive and bear in her womb a child who is to be named Jesus. Mary is perplexed and confused, but the angel reassures her that “nothing will be impossible with God.” In response, Mary obediently says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

While the stories of these two women parallel one another in Luke’s Gospel, it is clear that the angel’s annunciation to Mary is intended to *surpass* the angel’s appearance to Zechariah. Whereas the angel Gabriel appears to a priest in the great temple in Jerusalem “in the days of King Herod of Judea,” Gabriel now, sent by God, moves out into Galilee to the city of Nazareth to appear to a young woman. As Beverly Gaventa has noted, “the irony of Jesus’s birth begins here.” In contrast to John the Baptist, “Jesus is born *outside of the holy place* and *apart from the center of power* [Jerusalem], in God’s time rather than in the time of King Herod.”¹

While the pregnancy of Elizabeth is improbable given her old age and her barrenness, there are precedents in the history of Israel. One may recall the pregnancies of Sarah and Rachel and Hannah, all of whom became pregnant despite their old age and barrenness. But Mary is distinctive in that she is neither old nor barren, nor is she described, as both Zechariah and Elizabeth are, as “good” and “righteous” before God. She is rather simply described as a young woman whose pregnancy seems impossible because, as Luke eventually reveals, she has “known” no man, that is, she is a virgin. While the NRSV translates Mary’s response to the angel with “Here am I, the servant of the Lord,” this can easily misconstrue the agency involved here. A better translation is that Mary is a *slave* of the Lord. Some interpreters worry that the use of the word “slave”

¹ Beverly Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) 51.

here has reinforced the idea of the subjection of women to men, but as Beverly Gaventa points out, this is to misunderstand the point of the passage. Precisely in her being a *slave* of the Lord, Mary is *subject to no man*, indeed, to no human being, and no authority but God. Mary's statement points to the *authority* and *power* of God to bring about salvation. It is *God* who *chooses* Mary. Yet, Mary does, indeed, *consent* to her subjection to God: "Let it be with me according to your word." While traditional interpretations have used these passages to speak of the obedience of Mary as a kind of "model" for women in general – the text does not seem to point in this direction. Instead, Mary in Luke-Acts serves as something of a model for Christian *discipleship* in general. Significantly, at issue is *not* human-to-human relationships, but the *God-human* relationship.

While Mary enters the "house of Zechariah" importantly she does not address him, but Elizabeth. Immediately, Elizabeth speaks in the power of the Spirit: "Blessed are you among women, Blessed is the fruit of your womb, The mother of my Lord, The child in my womb leaped for joy, Blessed is she who believed." That Elizabeth speaks in the power of the Spirit is in direct contrast to *Zechariah* who God had made "dumb," unable to speak, as a result of his questioning of the angel earlier in Luke's first chapter. Elizabeth's speech is Spirit-filled and joyful. In the exchange there is joy over the pregnancies of both women. While there is still no doubt a sense of *expectation* in the narrative, for neither child has been born, even now in the *cry* from Elizabeth's mouth and in the leaping of John in the womb, the Spirit is *breaking in* and bringing joy in the cries and songs, in the *bodies*, indeed, in the *wombs* of these two women.

And then, in response to Elizabeth's greeting we encounter Mary's famous speech, known to many of us and to the Christian tradition as the *Magnificat*. The speech bears a strong resemblance to the song of Hannah at the birth of Samuel, but one also discerns echoes from other Old Testament texts. Whatever its sources, for Luke this is *Mary's* speech and it is *Mary's* interpretation of the events that have taken place and will take place that is especially important. As Raymond Brown has noted, Elizabeth praises Mary; but in response, Mary praises God. Mary does not appear here as one who is *merely* submissive to an angel – no: Mary's response to God's gift of grace is full of joy, thanksgiving, and praise. *Why is Mary full of joy?*

God has looked with favor on the *lowliness of his servant* (or slave). Mary's "lowliness" is connected with the poor and the powerless. The blessing that will be bestowed on Mary by "all generations" is an *extension* of God's blessing of Mary herself. And the nature of this extension of God's blessing is described in poignantly prophetic terms as God's action to *overturn* the world as it is. God has "scattered the proud" and "brought down the powerful." Mary, we might say, is an integral part of a much larger action by God that is now happening, that is at work in the world *through* the womb of a young woman. All of this is connected to God's promises to Abraham and to his descendants. This is the one of whom Micah spoke; this is the one who fulfills the hopes and expectations of Israel—who is faithful to the promise. In some sense, as some commentators have noted, for Luke, Mary is a "representative" of Israel—for she speaks "with and for Israel." And in a sense Mary becomes an "interpreter," indeed, even a *prophet* of the Gospel itself.² But the promised salvation of the world is not merely in the future tense, it is already happening now.

² Gaventa, *Mary*, 58.

Mary is the one who responds to God's gracious action in perfect obedience, for God is perfectly trustworthy. In this sense she is the model of Christian discipleship—of *following after* Jesus, of what in the Mennonite tradition we call *Nachfolge*. But, listen, Mary is *subject* to *no one else* – certainly no man and no earthly authority. Nor is she merely a passive recipient of God's gracious action—she is instead a powerful and radical interpreter of God's gracious action; Mary is a *fiery* and *fierce* prophet—a prophetess—her outrageous and revolutionary speech and her actions are akin to what the black church calls *womanish* – she is a slave to no man and no authority but God. And in this, too, she is to be called a model of Christian discipleship. And Mary is the one who, take note, first proclaims the Gospel—the Good News—of what will be for all and what is now taking place already *in her body*, in her *very womb*. This Gospel, this Good News, is not analogous to a Christmas Hallmark Card or to carefully placed presents around a Christmas tree—no, Mary announces a Gospel of what we might call, *womanist disruption*—there is no “Merry Christmas” for those in the halls of power, and for those who are satiated, whose security rests on the death and destruction of others. Mary's Gospel declares that the one who is about to be born from a young brown woman from Nazareth, one who is called blessed outside consecrated ground, is the same one in whom “the Mighty One” of Israel will “scatter the proud” and “bring down the powerful from their thrones”; the one who is to be named Jesus, from whom the *peace* of God will interrupt the world, is the one in whom the lowly will be lifted up and the hungry will be filled with good things – and the rich will be sent away empty. The one that is born of Mary is, indeed, Jesus the Messiah, the one who *overturns* the world itself in the manner of the Beatitudes where the last shall be first, and the lowly lifted up and called blessed. “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”