

Sermon - 12/11/22
Is 35:1-10; Lu 1:46b-55; Ja 5:7-10; Mt 11:2-11

We take time on the Third Sunday of Advent 2022 to visit Mary of Nazareth. God has sent the angel to tell her what is about to happen to her. She must be a woman (or a girl) of remarkable trust and faith in God to take the news so joyfully. This news, “You are pregnant with the Son of God,” would be devastating to a lesser soul. A young girl found to be pregnant with no marriage, only a betrothal. It could ruin her and her family.

But all the accompanying Scriptures today point to the re-creation of the earth – in fact, the re-creation of the universe by God. All things are being put to rights at the birth of this promised Messiah. The Apostle James calls this great event “the coming of the Lord.” (Ja 5:8) He speaks of Christ’s return to our world, bringing in the completely new one. The Prophet Isaiah saw it – water in the desert. Blooms and refreshment everywhere. He also admonishes God’s people to be strong in this time of waiting. Healing and restoration are coming to those who press in and press on. And here is the brave, pregnant teenager, Mary: *Be strong, do not fear! He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.* (Is 35:4)

When the angel tells Mary that she is favored by God, she hears it as good news. It is important to remember that every Hebrew woman wanted to bear lots of children – lots of sons. And every Hebrew woman wanted to give birth to Messiah. Listen to Mary’s response to the angel:

⁴⁶ Mary said,
“My heart praises the Lord;
⁴⁷ my soul is glad because of God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has remembered me, his lowly servant!
From now on all people will call me happy,
⁴⁹ because of the great things the Mighty God has done for me.
His name is holy;
⁵⁰ from one generation to another
he shows mercy to those who honor him.

Hear the political statement Mary is making? She, perhaps one of the weakest and least powerful citizens of Judah, says further on that God is bringing down proud kings – and lifting up the lowly, persecuted people of Palestine. The poor are fed good food – the rich get nothing.

Mary has not accomplished this act of justice. The reversal of worldly power out of the hands of rulers and into the hands of her people is God’s doing. The people of Judah have longed for freedom from oppression for many generations. Mary prophesies that the birth of her divine Son will bring her people’s vindication at last. This is by God’s mercy.

In Mary’s conversation with the Angel Gabriel we learn that, “...*faith all comes down to a single idea: ultimately, faith means openness to God’s will and trusting acceptance of his call, no matter what demands it makes upon us, no matter what risks it brings with it.*” (Mitch Finley, thewordamongus.org)

This young virgin is our spiritual model and teacher. Though she did have a question, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (Lu 1:34) Gabriel reveals the character and the power of God in his answer, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.” (v 35)

Once the angel answers Mary’s question, she freely expresses her joy in the coming of the Lord.

The Prophet Zephaniah describes the coming of the Lord God like this:

“The Lord your God is in your midst – a warrior bringing victory. He will create calm with His love; He will rejoice over you with singing.” (Zeph 3:17)

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The Prophet Isaiah tells us how to live so that the joy of the Lord will not evaporate in the heat of earthly struggles: “Sing to the Lord, who has done glorious things; proclaim this throughout all the earth.” (Is 12:5) You and I are imprisoned in our fallen state until the power of our righteous God frees us.

David sang this song when he was hiding out in the desert of Judea:

¹O God, you are my God,
and I long for you.
My whole being desires you;
like a dry, worn-out, and waterless land,
my soul is thirsty for you.
²Let me see you in the sanctuary;
let me see how mighty and glorious you are.
³Your constant love is better than life itself,
and so I will praise you.
⁴I will give you thanks as long as I live;
I will raise my hands to you in prayer.
⁵My soul will feast and be satisfied,
and I will sing glad songs of praise to you.
⁶As I lie in bed, I remember you;
all night long I think of you,
⁷because you have always been my help.
In the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. (Ps 63:1-7)

John Baptist, the last of the old-style prophets, explains what our lifestyle should be: (paraphrase) Don't take advantage of your position – be open-hearted and generous with one another. Never cheat – be content with what you have.

This simple, honest lifestyle comes to us only when Jesus washes us – when He purifies our hearts and our motives. ***Then*** we are ready for our Savior to return any day. John paints a picture of Jesus returning with fire and judgment – sifting out the wheat from the chaff. The Bible tells us this is Good News.

Let me share a prayer poem with you as we close:

“I pray for you today,
To the God Who has all power
That He would keep you close to Him
And strengthen you this hour,
And that you be conformed to Christ
In Whom your life is hid
And reflect to all the Father's love
As Christ our Savior did.
I pray that you might know Him well
And delight yourself in Him
Who sacrificed Himself for you
And cleansed you of your sin
I pray your eyes be lifted high
To Him enthroned above
Until He brings us home to Him
Upon His beams of love.” —Vicki Baird

Only by God's sovereign power to purify my heart – your heart – can we experience the Joy of the Lord as Mary did! Until Christ washes us, we are not free to choose to believe in Him truly. This is the heart of the Gospel. Amen.