

Today we take the next step during this Advent season on our journey towards the Light of the World. Last week we talked about Zechariah and how knowing our past is vital to any new adventure we undertake. Today we turn our attention to Mary and the power of potential. Our advent series is based on the Advent Study, Light of the World by Amy-Jill Levine.

Today we will look at Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel, her visit to her cousin Elizabeth, and the powerful and beautiful song she sang when she arrived at her cousin's house. We will look at historical and literary connections from her name, to the annunciation scene, to the Magnificat. In the light of Roman domination, her song has profound and even political meaning.

Just like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary's name is symbolic. There are both historical and present connotations to the name Mary. Historically, Mary would reflect on the story of Miriam, the sister of Moses. Miriam played a significant role in the rescue story of Moses. She followed his basket down the Nile river and then suggested to Pharaoh's daughter that the baby should be nursed by none other than Moses' own mother. Miriam is the first women in the bible to be designated as a prophet. She's also known as a song writer. "I will sing unto the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously the horse and rider thrown into the sea."

In the first century CE, Mary is a common Jewish name for women. At this time another woman could be a potential source of this name. Mariamne, who was the Hasmonean wife of Herod the Great. Herod's monarchy was through Roman appointment and not birth right. The Hasmoneans had assumed the throne during the time of the Maccabees in the 2nd century BC. A name like Mary would be a wistful nod to the hope that one day there would be a Hasmonean king on the throne.

While the gospels have 2 different genealogies for Joseph, none exists for Mary. Biblically, we don't know that much about Mary's background. An attempt was made through a writing called the Protevangelium of James. This writing declares Mary to be the daughter of a righteous elderly couple named Anna and Joachim. You're going to love the familiarity of their story.

They are infertile. They pray for a child. They promise to dedicate this child to God. Anna miraculously conceives and they have a baby girl. When Mary turns 3 they take her to live in the Jerusalem Temple. Not my idea of a good daycare center.

When Mary turns twelve, the priests decide to find a man for her to live with for protection. In the lineup of righteous widowers, guess who the lucky guy was? Yes it was Joseph who was old and with grown kids. As the story goes, when Joseph walked by Mary his walking stick began to bloom.

The story gets even better. Mary is with her other virgin friends spinning thread for the Temple veil. This is where she meets the angel Gabriel. According to James, Jesus is born, not in a stable, but in a cave and there's a midwife to help Mary through the birth.

One final tidbit. When Herod sends soldiers to Bethlehem to kill all baby boys under the age of 2, Elizabeth and baby John escape. But soldiers kill Zechariah.

Now please understand that none of what I just told you has any scriptural or even historical proof. But isn't it human nature? When we don't have details and want to know more sometimes we make things up.

Now Matthew's gospel will focus on Joseph's dreams, and we'll get to that during our last week of this study. Luke keeps focus on Mary, starting with the annunciation or the appearance of the angel Gabriel with a message. Mary is not the first person in the bible to have an angel appear to her with a message. In Genesis an angel tells Hagar, servant of Sarah, that the baby she is carrying will be protected and become a great nation. An angel appears to Abraham, telling him that he and his old wife Sarah would have a baby. Sarah would find out this was no laughing matter.

Rebecca, wife of Isaac, is told by an angel that she is carrying two nations in her womb and the older would serve the younger. In Judges the wife of Manoah is told that she will have a son. Samson will be one of the Judges of Israel.

So back to our story, which begins with Luke 1:26. “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth.” Remember what I said about the significance of time markers? Elizabeth is clearly showing by now. Gabriel will use this fact as proof of the validity of his annunciation to Mary. Elizabeth is a frame to the story.

Luke has us set up pretty well by now. We fully expect Gabriel to be impatient. Not one to be questioned. We saw what happened to Zechariah. This time Gabriel is sent to Nazareth in Galilee. Thank you, Luke, for trying to help us figure out where the heck Nazareth is. Nazareth is small, at best just a few hundred people. It’s also not in Judea or even remotely close to Jerusalem. It’s also not under direct Roman occupation.

We get all of this from those mere 17 words in Luke 1:26. We get a time, a place, a heavenly messenger, divine intervention into history, connection with celestial and terrestrial and a setup for a good story.

Who does God send Gabriel to see? Vs 27, “a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David’s house. The virgin’s name was Mary.” Ok all you literary fanatics out there. Luke just did a thing. It’s called an “end-stress”. This is where the most important part of the story comes at the end of the sentence. Sorry Joesph. By looking at life in general during this time period, we can estimate that Mary was in her late teens. Joseph would likely be about 10 years older.

Gabriel...you’ve come all the way from heaven. What do you have to say? “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” Well, that’s pretty darn cordial. In fact it’s quite endearing. Luke uses the Greek word chaire. This was a standard greeting. One of joy. Kind of like how today you and I would say. “Glad to meet you!” This same word of greeting will be used in reference

to the Magi when they see the star. The Latin translation of this is Ave which means “be well” or “hail”. This is how eventually we would get the Latin phrase “Ave Maria” Hail Mary.

We feel greeted Gabriel! Whatcha got next? “The Lord is with you.” Um, Gabriel...is that supposed to be comforting? I think I would feel a little bit apprehensive now.

I don’t know if you’ve noticed this, but did you realize that when an angel makes an announcement to someone, it usually comes with a catch? A catch that requires a response? A catch that typically means something that won’t be easy.

To describe Mary’s reaction, Luke will use a word we are already somewhat familiar with. She was “much perplexed by his word and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Luke chooses the Greek word diatarasso for the word perplexed. Remember tarasso from last week? So Mary wasn’t just confused perplexed, she was terrified perplexed. Something momentous and life-change is about to happen to this nobody Jewish girl from a nowhere place on the outskirts of the empire.

Gabriel rushes to assure her not to fear because, “God is honoring you.” Well, that would sure make me feel better. Here’s a kicker for you. We don’t know why Mary is worthy of this favor. There was no divine notice of things like, she helped her mother with the laundry. She studied hard in school. She had a beautiful singing voice. She prayed a lot. She was a virgin. I believe it is that more often than we care to think, God freely chooses who ever. Fishermen, Cloth dyers, Tentmakers. ANYONE.

Remember that I said there was a catch? Here comes the catch. Gabriel tells Mary she is going to conceive and give birth to a son named Jesus. A son that will be “The Son of the Most High”. A son not only inheriting David’s throne but one that will reign over an eternal kingdom. (Big sign) Um, God...That’s an awful lot to take in.

Now Mary, she has a question. But wait, Mary, didn't you hear what happened to your cousin-in-law Zechariah? What do you think you can ask? I have suggestions. What about those pesky Romans? But Mary, she starts with practical. "How will that happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?"

We all remember that huffy response from Gabriel at Zechariah's question. Striking him mute for asking a question. What will happen to Mary? NOTHING. In fact, Gabriel's response is profound. "The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God's Son. That was enough for Mary. And no she wasn't struck mute.

Before Mary has a chance to ask anymore questions, Gabriel throws down the proof card of this announcement and note that Mary did not ask for a sign. "Your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled to "unable to conceive" is now six months pregnant. And then Gabriel lowers the boom. "Nothing is impossible for God."

Nothing is impossible for God. That was a difficult statement then and continues to be today. It can give us the impression that God could have acted when we or someone we loved needed healing or rescue. Humanity is constantly required to respond to things like slavery, exile, and genocide. We need to look no further than the faith demonstrated in ancient Israel and in the early followers of Jesus to see the way of survival.

It's how we find the courage to respond as Mary did, "Here am I". Here the Greek word is idou, translated Behold. Look at me! Mary says. Pay attention to me. Not because I am important, but because I am stepping up as the Lord's servant. Luke uses the Greek word doule for servant. Literally a slave. Mary's self-description anticipates Jesus' own form of leadership: not to lord it over, but to serve. And this word would not have sounded genteel in a first century period. Slaves hearing this story would find connection to Mary, and they would find hope.

Angel message check. Mary's in, check. What's next. Visit Elizabeth. Some would say this visit was out of fear. Mary was pregnant out of wedlock and fearful of being stoned. But being stoned for such acts was really not that common. So Mary was not in danger of capital punishment. Perhaps, she just needed guidance from her older cousin, Elizabeth.

When Mary arrives, her words are not the first we hear. We hear from Elizabeth. Elizabeth is how we know that not only did she hear Mary's greeting but the baby inside her did as well. When Mary greeted Elizabeth, the baby inside her moved. It is this baby's movement that sets the stage for Elizabeth's words to Mary. "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry."

Not only is Elizabeth blessed with her own child, she is blessed by the one Mary is carrying. Mary is, in Elizabeth's words, "The mother of my lord." Elizabeth becomes a prophet in this moment. She senses the baby Mary is carrying far before Mary would be showing. Elizabeth knows that Mary carries, not just any child, but an heir of David. With that she bestows a blessing on Mary. "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." You know, that nothing is impossible with God thing.

Elizabeth's words are centered around hearing. Around the message that words matter and the sound of words matters. At this point in history, literacy was low and books were expensive. One learned by hearing stories of words with meaning and power. It's why we would hear Jesus say repeatedly. "Let the person who has ears listen."

So, finally we get to the moment we've been waiting for. The words we heard in our scripture today. It is known as the Magnificat. Mary extends the blessings from Elizabeth's lips to the world. "All generations will call me blessed."

The story that precedes this song tells us why Mary deserves to be called blessed. She received the angel's words and accepted them with grace and humility. Her focus was not on herself, but on the mighty acts of God.

“With all my heart, I glorify the Lord.” Mary is all in deep to her soul or psyche as the Greek says. Every single part of her being praises. Every single part of her is blessed. She goes on to say, “In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.” The Greek word for depths is pneuma or “my spirit”. Hmm...that’s the same word we use for the Holy Spirit. Does that mean that the Holy Spirit and human spirit unite? As the 8 ball would say, “Signs would indicate so”.

For Mary, this union is a rejoicing for “God my Savior.: The Greek word for Savior is soter as in soteriology or the discussion of salvation. The discussion of salvation is not exclusive to Christians. Jews also believe in salvation. For Jews salvation means freedom or release from current circumstances. From things like slavery, poverty, illness, hunger, and thirst.

Mary song is all about salvation as described by the Jews. And she can literally feel it in her body, soul, spirit, and womb. Mary proclaims God’s name to be holy. In Judaism, God’s name is so holy that YHWH cannot be pronounced. They do not take the name frivolously. But that does not for a moment mean no intimate relation with God. God is described in the Hebrew bible as father, king, friend, and savior.

Mary recognizes God’s fidelity in the past and present, which helps her know that this fidelity continues to the future. She says that “He shows mercy to everyone from one generation to the next.” How does this happen? God “scatters those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.” God “pulls the powerful down from their thrones.” And finally, “God fills the hungry with good things.

We still see these mercies today. Whenever someone gives to those in need. Whenever someone demonstrates servant-leadership. In these moments we see faithfulness to the Torah and the Gospel. We see these miracles because as God’s children, it is our responsibility to carry them out. Church family, we are responsible to carry out God’s miracles. The good news, the Gospel. It’s not a gospel of gain; it’s a gospel of trust. It’s not a gospel of wealth; it’s a gospel of thanks.

Mary ends her song with remembrance and recollection of God's servant Isarel, of God's promises of mercy and of God's promise to Abraham and his descendants. A promise ratified by the Torah. A Torah which says "you must love neighbor as yourself" and any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your own. " She goes on to speak of a new covenant that will be ratified through Jesus. A covenant of continuation from the Torah. And when we follow the new covenant ratified by Jesus, the hungry are fed.

Mary leaves right before John was born. We don't know why, but maybe just maybe it was out of respect. To give Elizabeth and Zechariah their moment. Hers would be there very soon.

Mary's power of potential can be summed up in her response to Gabriel. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." What Gabriel said she knew was true. "Nothing is impossible with God."