



Sunday, Dec. 13, 2020
Sermon Series: *Do Not Be Afraid*

Do Not Be Afraid to Choose Love
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Luke 1:39-55 NRSV

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for ever."

Facebook recently asked 4 to 8-year-olds to respond to the question: "What does love mean?" Their answers were often touching and insightful. Six-year-old Chrissy said: "Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs." Seven-year-old Bobby said: "Love is what's in the room at Christmas if you stop opening presents and just listen." Eight-year-old Cindy said: "During my piano recital, I was on a stage and I was scared. I looked at all the people watching me and saw my daddy waving and smiling. He was the only one doing that. I wasn't scared anymore." And finally, eight-year-old Rebecca said: "My grandmother

got arthritis and couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore....So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love."

When I arrived at church on Tuesday morning, I saw an example of love in action. I was coming in the west door. I noticed a man either taking or leaving some food at Zumbro's new mini-pantry. The sign says "Take what you need. Leave what you can." We introduced ourselves. He told me his name was Arvid. He said he stops by the pantry often, just to check on supplies. He explained that he has grandchildren in town. He can't bear the thought of them, or any children, going hungry. So he comes with supplies, items he thinks his grandchildren would eat if they needed to stop. Three or four times over the course of our conversation, Arvid said, "I gotta' give back. I have plenty. Pastor, you'll see me again later this week."

This brief exchange was a great way to start the day! Arvid said he had spent his career at Mayo working in maintenance. He was motivated purely out of a need to help. In fact, during our conversation, Arvid looked over at the white van parked across the street. He commented, "We have to make sure that the man in the van is warm enough this winter." As Arvid said this, I wasn't exactly sure what he meant by "we." I mean, I'd just met him. But I was sure he had a heart full of love, and he was determined to do what he could to be of assistance to others.

This encounter sounds like the Gospel of Luke to me. Just a reminder, we're be reading Luke at worship over the next four months. To better follow the story, I encourage you to read it at home too. Luke sets out to write an "orderly account." That sounds rather official. But he has a way of dividing the story of Jesus into bite-sized chunks, and then giving them a human face.

Keep in mind, the larger story swirling around Luke involves the dominance of the Roman Empire, the decisions of powerful men like Caesar Augustus, and the schemes of politicians such as Pontius Pilate. Luke brings it all down to earth. He says God has a way of upending the plans of the rich and powerful. And God often does this by working through every day, ordinary people like Arvid.

A young woman named Mary goes to visit Elizabeth at her home in the hill country of Judea. They are every day, ordinary people who happen to be related. Both are pregnant, albeit under some very different circumstances. Elizabeth is ready for the nursing home. Mary doesn't have a husband and the neighbors are talking. They sit down together in the living room. At the sound of Mary's voice, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy. Clearly, there's more going on than meets the eye. That's often the case when God gets involved.

I can picture Zechariah sitting in the corner, listening to the two women chattering on about unimaginable things. Zechariah has lost his ability to speak, so all he can do is listen. What he hears are Mary and Elizabeth daring to dream of what God might be up to in and through the boys they are carrying in their wombs.

Elizabeth speaks first. She's excited that Mary has come to see her. She's excited to feel the response of the baby inside. She's excited because her young cousin has the good sense to believe that what's happening to her is not an accident, but part of a larger plan. In fact, it's what Elizabeth herself has been sensing from God.

Next it's Mary's turn. You might think they would take a break for coffee or lunch. Their conversation could drift into less-lofty topics – mood swings and backaches and swollen feet. Elizabeth is six months further along. Her perspective might be helpful for Mary. But that's not where this conversation is headed.

Mary speaks a word from the Lord. That word is actually a song we've been singing ever since. We call it the *Magnificat* from the first word of the Latin translation. It focuses on one of Luke's favorite themes: the reversal God is bringing to our world. As Mary sees it, it's not Rome or Caesar Augustus or Pontius Pilate who have the power. It's God! And God is not above using a couple of peasant women to get God's work done. Thus, Mary and Elizabeth are caught up in a truly remarkable drama.

Mary's words sound like the prophets of old. Much like those prophets, she speaks of the future using past tense. It's as if those things have already been accomplished. Mary focuses on herself first: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit sings for joy in God my Savior. You have done – [there's the past tense] – great things for me, holy is your name."

Mary is singing right there in the living room. The song is about her, to be sure, but it's about so much more. It's about Elizabeth and Zechariah, and all the other little people who will come after them – the poor, the powerless, the oppressed of the world. Mary speaks a sharp – dare I say subversive – word to those in power: "Lord, you have scorned the thoughts of the proud and relieved them of their swollen heads. Maybe they'll learn humility along the way. Lord, you have lifted up the lowly. Maybe they'll find some confidence in themselves. Holy is your name."

What's going on here? God's great reversal – that's the theme of Mary's song. Oh, it's not as if God will even every score, right every wrong, and finally give everyone exactly what they deserve – at least not until the end of time. It's

rather that the world will finally begin to look more like God intended all along. The hungry will have enough to eat; and the rich will be sent away empty-handed, and who knows, maybe they'll finally find room in their life for more than money can buy.

So, what do you think – is the *Magnificat* all just wishful thinking? Is it a wide-eyed dream cooked up by two expectant mothers hoping for a better world for their boys, fantasizing about things that could never possibly happen? No, proclaims Mary, *God* will make this come to be! How does Mary know this? She doesn't. All she has to go on is trust. She hasn't had a sonogram. She doesn't have a notarized note from Gabriel. She doesn't even have a husband yet. All she has to go on is her unquestioning willingness to believe that the God who has chosen her will be a part of whatever happens next. Again, Mary doesn't wait to see how things will turn out before she starts to sing. She sings ahead of time. And she trusts God to work things out for good.

As you know, the Pfizer vaccine has been approved by the FDA. It's being shipped out and will arrive as early as Monday. Deciding who gets the vaccine first is going to take the wisdom of Solomon and then some. In Great Britain, 90-year-old Margaret Keenan was the first person to receive the shot.

Who should have priority in the United States? The elderly? Health care workers? First responders? Teachers? Here's where it gets tricky. So far, I've heard suggestions ranging from members of Congress, to farmers, to – well – sixty-five-year-old preachers who occasionally meet up with people (okay, I made that one up).

Three former presidents – Clinton, Bush, and Obama – have said they'd be willing to get vaccinated, but they were quick to add that they didn't want to skip their place in line. To get those who are hesitant on board, we might need to recruit a few celebrities. It would be not unlike Elvis Presley getting vaccinated for polio in 1956.

Who gets priority? I have my opinions and so do you, but I'm glad it's not up to us to decide. While the *Magnificat* doesn't spell out specific instructions, it suggests that priority cannot be based simply on money and influence and power. That's not the way God intends for life to be. God's ways are bigger than our ways. We'll see that more clearly when Jesus finally arrives on the scene.

While we're waiting for Jesus to come, what if we spent more time singing Mary's song? So asks Karoline Lewis in the December issue of Living Lutheran magazine. According to Lewis, the *Magnificat* is a song for us to sing instead of whining about indifference and intolerance. It's a song for us to sing

instead of spewing fear and hatred. It's a song for us to sing instead of closing our mouths, unwilling to speak up or speak out.

Singing Mary's song, says Lewis, would make our world a different place, a better place, a place where we might catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God. It's a song that trusts in God's future and nudges us toward living into that future today.

Friends, how will that future impact you? That will likely depend on what love means to you. Giving away French fries, encouraging a frightened daughter at her piano recital, kneeling down to paint someone's toenails? How about filling up the mini-pantry with food your grandchildren would eat, trying to find a warm place this winter for the guy in the white van, being supportive of the decisions of who gets the vaccine first and feeling no need to skip your place in line?

"Do not be afraid," the angel Gabriel announces to Mary, and specifically, "do not be afraid to choose love." The world needs it more than we know. When we join Mary in singing her love song, we see the world as God intends for it to be. Mary's love song trusts in *God's* future, and not that of the rich and powerful and self-important. It's a song for everyone, and we sing it to insist on making God's future present here and now. Amen.