

C Advent 4 12.19.21

Luke 26-56

Focus Statement: God is bringing a salvation of reversal

In last week's sermon I talked a lot about how John the Baptist was calling us to take small steps for the kingdom of God. John told the crowd to share extra coats and food, admonished tax collectors to take only what was due in tax, and for soldiers to be satisfied with their wages. These small, simple, seemingly insignificant steps, John told us, are how the valleys are filled and the hills leveled, one shovelful at a time.

Today's, appropriately enough for the upside-down world of Luke's Gospel, contradicts everything I said last week. So, if you left last Sunday feeling like John wasn't quite the hero you needed, guess what friends, we've got Mary, Elizabeth, and an unborn John to give you a different message.

First off, a little background setting. One, because we enter the story "in the sixth month" and it might be nice to know the sixth month of what. But two, because the story we are in "the sixth month" of, is a crazy cool story and it doesn't make near enough Christmas pageant appearances, so I feel it is my obligation as your pastor to make sure you know this fascinating bit of nativity backstory. So, after some introductory chatter, the Gospel of Luke starts by introducing us to a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Zechariah and Elizabeth, we are told, were "righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments," which is pretty high praise. But, as modern science tells us, your faith is not an indicator of your reproductive possibilities, so despite wanting to be parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth were childless. And, by this point, they were old, at least old in the

sense of having children, and they had resigned themselves that parenthood was just not in the cards for them.

That is until one day when Zechariah was in the temple carrying out his priestly duties, and an angel of the Lord appeared to him, specifically Gabriel, the one we heard about in our Gospel reading this morning. Gabriel told Zechariah, using the same general format as the announcement made to Mary, guess what Zechariah, you and Elizabeth are going to be parents! Zechariah, like Mary, was surprised by this announcement, though for the opposite reason Mary was, being at opposite ends of the childbearing spectrum. Mary was like, I'm not married and I know how this works, Zechariah was like, um, we're old. We know from this morning's reading that the angel's sign for Mary was, your cousin Elizabeth is pregnant. You know what his sign for Zechariah was? "I am Gabriel... because you did not believe my words... you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." And while Zechariah was silenced, we hear Elizabeth speak for the first time, saying, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably upon me," and for five months she remained in seclusion.

Then in the sixth month, the Gospel takes us from Jerusalem and Zechariah and Elizabeth to the next place "the angel Gabriel was sent by God... a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary." Notice how the writer of Luke moves us from the cosmic to the personal, as we come in from God to Galilee to a family to Mary. If you're remembering a dream where the angel also appeared to Joseph, that's in Matthew's Gospel, that's not in Luke. In Luke,

Zechariah is silenced, Joseph doesn't appear at all apart from a brief name drop, all the narrative focuses on two women, one at the end of her life and one at the very beginning.

It is really almost impossible for us in our modern context to understand just how backwards this entire reading would have sounded to its original audience. Zechariah, the only man in the story, the sort of man whom his son would later encourage to share his coat or not take more than he was owed, is rendered silent by an angel, giving us thirty verses of an old woman and a young woman plotting the overthrow of corrupt systems while a child so young it hasn't even been born yet leaps in support.

And then, in response to seeing Elizabeth, to hearing of John's leap at her presence, to knowing the words the angel Gabriel spoke were true, Mary let out a song not just of praise, but of resistance. We read it together just a few minutes ago, I hope you were paying attention. Just a few key takeaways, Mary started "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." Nice, solid message of praise there. But then look where it goes, "He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought the powerful down from their thrones and lifted the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." "Surely," said Mary, the unwed teenage mother in a time when such situation could end in disgrace at the best, singing to an old woman, whose pregnancy brought its own scandal, aren't you a little old for that sort of thing, singing of children who will both grow up to die at the hands of the state, one by beheading, and another on a cross, but not before starting a movement that led to salvation and the radical undoing of everything that that been known, "surely from

now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me.”

Dear people of God, the good news of Advent, the good news of Jesus, is a message of salvation through radical reversal. John told the powerful to think small. Crowds, share what you have. Tax collectors, take what is due. Soldiers, be satisfied with your pay. Mary and Elizabeth, whose entire existence was that of small, quiet, invisible, instead proclaim a message to think huge. The good news of this passage, the good news of this season is that the coming kingdom of God which we are called, empowered, strengthened, born, to be part of, is a kingdom not at all like the one we have been led to believe is all we can hope for. The message of this passage, of this season, is to think big, to act big, to take big risks in bringing about the world which God is calling us to. This is a season to ask ourselves, what does the kingdom of God look like, and then to act on that vision. To not be held captive by those who would tell us that the way things are is the way they will always be, that we are too old, too young, too poor, too powerless, too whatever to bring that world into existence.

Dear people of God, I don't know the thing that God is calling you to. I can't give examples because I wouldn't even venture a guess. That's the thing about the big, bold call of God, it's never the thing you expect. Mary and Elizabeth certainly didn't expect the calls they received. All I can say is, this, when that call comes, don't be afraid to jump at it. Or, be afraid, because a healthy amount of fear in the face of a giant leap of faith is an appropriate response. It's why the angels always start their messages, do not be afraid, they know there's a good reason for you to be. So, maybe be afraid, but leap anyway. It is the season

for radical attempts at transformation coming from the most unexpected of people. And, most importantly, never let the world tell you that you are not the right person for whatever task you feel called to take on. Mary was. Elizabeth was. And so are you. Thanks be to God. Amen.