

“Mothers of the Impossible”

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour ...”

Good news needs to be shared. It may be a letter of acceptance to the university of your first choice, or the news that you and your beloved are engaged, or that your friend’s cancer is in remission. It is news that cannot be kept to oneself, news that must be shared so that others can join in the celebration of this moment of joy in one’s life.

The good news that Mary has received is news that she has to share, and so *“in those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.”* (Luke 1:39-40). The good news that Mary needs to share is that she is expecting a child; but while this is always news that expectant parents share, her pregnancy is not only good news for her family but, as the angel will proclaim to the shepherds on the day of her child’s birth, *“good news of great joy for all the people”* (2:10). It is the good news that the angel Gabriel brought to her in her home in Nazareth, the news that *“you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will call him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.”* (1:30-32). The angel also shared with Mary the good news that *“your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.”* (1:36). In both Galilee and Judea, the good news that the angel proclaims to these women is that *“nothing will be impossible with God”* (1:37). It seems fitting that both “mothers of the impossible” need to share the good news that has changed their lives and will change the course of human history; and so, on this day, good news is shared when Mary enters the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth and greets Elizabeth. Since Mary was not told to go to Elizabeth, her visit is more likely an indication of her joy and wonder at what is occurring to both expectant mothers. The meeting of the women is accompanied by a sign: *“When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb”* (1:41). This recalls other prenatal signs in the Bible, including the struggle of Jacob and Esau in Rebekah’s womb:

- “The children struggled together within her; and she said, “if this is to be this way, why do I live?’ So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD

said to her, ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.’” – Genesis 25:22-23.

The movement of the child in Elizabeth’s womb is immediately followed by her being “*filled with the Holy Spirit, and [she] exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.’*” (1:42). This inspired speech is a prophetic oracle that offers “*praise for the faithfulness of Mary, the blessedness of the Lord’s birth, and the wonder of God’s work of redemption*” (Alan Culpepper). Elizabeth’s being filled with the Holy Spirit identifies her words as a prophetic utterance, the Word of God, which declares the blessedness of Mary and the child that will be born to her. Elizabeth’s words evoke blessings pronounced on Jael and Judith in the Hebrew Scriptures:

- “Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed.” – Judges 5:24.
- “Then Uzziah said to her, ‘O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God, who created the heavens and the earth, who has guided you to cut off the head of the leader of our enemies.’” – Judith 13:18.

Elizabeth follows this proclamation of Mary’s blessedness with a question that also explicitly discloses the identity of the child in Mary’s womb: “*And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?*” (1:43). She now understands the meaning of the movement of her child in the womb when she heard Mary’s greeting: “*the child in my womb leaped for joy*” (1:44). Elizabeth then pronounces a beatitude on Mary for her faith that the promise to her would be fulfilled: “*And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*” (1:45). Elizabeth blesses Mary because she has been chosen to be the mother of the Lord, and she has believed in the Word of God. “*Blessing always comes from trusting that God’s Word will be fulfilled.*” (Culpepper).

The prophetic oracles of Elizabeth are matched by the song of praise from Mary known as the *Magnificat*, from the Latin word for “magnifies.” Mary’s song is a joyful celebration of what the Lord has done for her as well as the effects of the Lord’s coming for all people. Mary’s song is a celebration of the good news that she is experiencing that is like the song of Hannah, another “mother of the impossible”

who rejoices at the birth of her son Samuel, who will become a great prophet of the Lord:

- “My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. ‘There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God ... He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed.’” – 1 Samuel 2:1-2, 9-10.

Mary’s words of praise speak of God’s redeeming work not as future but as already being fulfilled; God is praised for what God has done. The use of past tense expresses what is timelessly true: past, present, and future without differentiation; for *“his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation”* (1:50). The couplets in Mary’s song describe the dramatic reversal that are the signature of God’s mighty acts: *“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty”* (1:52-53). It establishes a pattern that will continue to Luke’s account of the Beatitudes, in which Jesus not only pronounces blessings upon the poor, the hungry, and those who weep, but also woes upon those who are full now but will suffer hunger and mourning in their future:

- “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.” – Luke 6:24-26.

More than predictions of what is to come, Mary’s song praises God for the goodness of God’s nature and the redemption that Israel and the Church have experienced. Mary is “singing ahead of time” for all generations who will be blessed by the good news that Mary and Elizabeth share on the day, good news that will be shared with all who will hear the good news that *“to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is the Messiah, the Lord”* (Luke 2:11).

- “Elizabeth and Zechariah are the first to hear her song, but it is not just for them. It is also for her, Mary, and for the Mighty One who has done great things for her. It is for Gabriel, who first gave her the good news, and for all who will benefit from it – for the proud and powerful who will be relieved

from their swelled heads, for the hungry who will be filled with good things, for the rich who will be sent away empty so that they have room in them for more than money can buy. Her song is for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – for Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel – for every son and daughter of Israel who thought God had forgotten the promise to be with them forever, to love them forever, to give them fresh and endless life.” – Barbara Brown Taylor.

At the conclusion of the Magnificat, Luke reports that “*Mary remained with [Elizabeth] for about three months and then returned to her home.*” (1:56). The next time we meet Mary in Luke’s Gospel is when she travels with Joseph to Bethlehem, where “*she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*” (2:7). She continues to appear throughout the Gospels as she remains involved in the life of her son, and she is indeed the one who “*all generations will call ... blessed.*” By her faithful response to the angel’s announcement and by sharing this good news, Mary becomes the first disciple of her son, “*indeed, the first Christian, by hearing the word, i.e., the good news of Jesus’ identity as Messiah and God’s Son, and by accepting it.*” (Raymond Brown). By sharing this good with Elizabeth, both “*mothers of the impossible*” rejoice in the good news that all things are possible with God, that the light of Christ shines in the darkness of every age, and that no darkness can overcome it. The prophetic words of Elizabeth and the song of Mary sing out the good news of God that we share every Christmas, the “*promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.*” (1:55).

- “The first Christian disciple exemplifies the essential task of discipleship. After hearing the Word of God and accepting it, we must share it with others, not by simply repeating it but by interpreting so that they can see it truly as *good news*. As we look forward in Advent to the coming of Christ, let us ask ourselves how this year we are going to interpret for others what we believe happens at Christmas, so that they will be able to appreciate what the angel announced at the first Christmas: ‘I announce to you good news of great joy which will be for the whole people: To you this day there is born in the city of David a Saviour who is Messiah and Lord.’” – Brown.

The song of Mary is one of the most beloved hymns of the Christian faith; the Magnificat has been set to music by the world’s great composers and sung by choirs and congregations for generations. It is a song that was sung centuries ago in a time and place far different from ours, but it is a song that remains timeless and relevant because it celebrates the goodness of God and the good news that the children born

to both of these “mothers of the impossible” will be instrumental in God’s work of salvation that will be a blessing for children of all generations. It is the good news proclaimed by Elizabeth’s son, John the Baptist, who calls upon the people to “*prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*” (3:4). The sons of Elizabeth and Mary will meet on the banks of the Jordan River, where John baptizes Jesus “*to fulfill all righteousness,*” and where the voice from heaven proclaims, “*this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*” (Matthew 3:15, 17). When John from his prison cell questions whether Jesus is indeed “*the one who is to come,*” Jesus points to his deeds as the fulfillment of God’s promises and the reason why his followers can confess with confidence that he is indeed the Messiah, the Son of the Living God: “*... the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.*” (Matthew 11:5). As we give thanks for these “mothers of the impossible” who experienced and testified to the fact that nothing is impossible with God, we are also called to follow their example of sharing the good news we have received so that everyone may believe the word that is spoken to us in this season of hope in the good news of the birth of the child of Mary, the child who is *Emmanuel* – “God is with us.”

- “The Virgin Mary has always been proposed to the faithful by the church as an example to be imitated, not precisely in the type of life she led and much less for the sociocultural background in which she lived and which scarcely today exists anywhere. Rather she is held up as an example to the faithful for the way in which in her own particular life she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God, because she heard the word of God and acted on it, and because charity and the spirit of service were the driving force of her actions. She is worthy of imitation because she was the first and most perfect of Christ’s disciples.” – Pope Paul VI.

Good news needs to be shared; and now more than ever the good news of Christmas needs to be shared in our world that is once again dominated by bad news, a world living in the fear and uncertainty of the ongoing pandemic and a new variant that threatens to restrict and separate us yet again. We are powerless to change much of what is happening among us; but we have a message to share that will bring “*good news of great joy*” today as it brought good news to the shepherds abiding in their fields, keeping watch over their flock by night: the good news we hear from the “mothers of the impossible” who knew that *nothing* is impossible because of the good news we share as disciples of Mary’s son, the good news that is “*joy to the world, the Lord is come!*” Amen.