**Sermon 12-23-18**

**Paul Purdue preaching**

**Mary’s Song - Dec. 23, 2018**

This week I bumped into Sarah Mcwhirt-Toler at Fido. After handing her my notarized shot record, she let me hold little 45 day old Francis. Pastoring has its privileges. I found the quietest space in the coffee shop and swayed with Francis looking at the lights, gazing out the windows, and trying to focus on the reflections dancing off my glasses; glasses have their benefits. Maybe the best 20 minutes of the week! Only a waiter’s warm laughter and gentle question reeled me back into the present. Back in the here and now, I realize I was singing aloud to the baby.  Hold a baby, make up a few songs, and you likely will start dreaming of a better world.

Expecting. We use the word “expecting” to describe pregnancy. Mary is expecting. She holds within her body the the promise and miracle of life. Pregnancy sets our minds to dreaming, lamenting, and singing of a better world.   Mary and Elizabeth heroically expect a better world! Faith longs and works to bring it about! Oh, that the Bible held more women’s stories, but perhaps sinful men failed to see God working through female leadership, Some don’t even see it today!

As a teen, likely less than sixteen years old, Mary’s faith is wisely cautious. When God sends messengers, the angels do not come preaching the prosperity Gospel. Gabriel does not come to offer Mary a luxurious Mediterranean cruise. Angels do not call us to comfort but to put us to work: Noah, build an ark, Abraham and Sarah, go to a land I will show you. Go down Moses, tell old oppressive Pharaoh to let my people go. Jeremiah, go weeping and preach bad news to the king. Mary, stand at the cradle and the cross; stand amazed in the temple and shocked at the empty tomb! God’s message is more often about saving the world rather than napping on the beach.

    From the start, Mary wonders what kind of greeting this angel brings. The angel reassures her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus (God’s salvation). This child will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High” No less perplexed, Mary asks, “How can this be? ” Do you ever bow your head and ask, ”Lord, how can this be?”

Mary knows pregnancy outside of marriage holds great risk and danger. The best outcome would be exactly what Matthew writes, "And Joseph, her fiancé, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace Mary, planned to send her away secretly” (Matthew 1:19). What does “send her away” imply? Where would Joseph send his pregnant bride? Without a husband, a woman could not own property and many were reduced to panhandling or prostitution.

In a warm holiday air, we might like to gloss over the culture that surrounds Mary. We might want to ignore the deepest fear Mary holds. We might avoid preaching about the danger that Mary faced because the deep threat to Mary's life and the life of the Baby Jesus literally comes from the Bible. "If no proof of the young woman’s virginity can be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father’s house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death. She has done an outrageous thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father’s house. You must purge the evil from among you” (Deuteronomy 22:20-21 NIV). The letter kills. A literal reading of the Old Testament law prescribes stoning for a woman who came to her fiancé pregnant.

So imagine yourself  as Mary hearing God’s messenger? What would you expect? What would you believe? What would you risk it? Would you drink the bitter water? Mary asks, “How can this be? How can it be? How will this happen?” Pause and ponder her question: how can it be? Faith always asks ‘how can it be?’ There is something holy about asking! Faith inquires. Faith ponders. Faith is perplexed. Faith asks, ”how can this be, even as it whispers, ‘Lord let it be’.” A faith that never reasons, weighs the risks, or challenges the status quo is not faith at all, but a distracting opiate! There is a holy pondering and divine perplexity! When Mary missed a cycle and knew something miraculous, holy, and risky was growing within her body, now doubt she felt both.How can it be and let it be - all at once! A deep faith asks and follows!

At times  the warm glow of Christmas blinds us  to the danger within the story. Did Mary need to flee her hometown and find sanctuary with her Aunt Elizabeth’s and Uncle Zechariah? Was it the religious police? Did Mary fear her own family might seek her life? How could a father, brothers, or others demand  a “dis-honor” killing?

Mary runs to Elizabeth, as the Holy Family fled an evil king finding refuge in Egypt, or Moses’ mother laid her beautiful child in a basket to escape Pharaoh's genocide, or as Central American mothers walk north, or as addicted mothers enters rehab, or as abused mothers raise sons saying never again, or as, as, as, as…  Mary, uncertain of her future, and Elizabeth, too old to be chasing toddlers, both embrace the holy mystery. Both stand perplexed before the God who is with us. Both ponder the miracle of the Holy Spirit coming upon them. Both set to dreaming, hoping, creating a better future!

But what if her righteous aunt turns her away? What if her preacher uncle judges her harshly? What if a place of love turns its back? Maybe Mary whistled as she walked up into the hill country, "This is my fight song. Prove I'm alright song. My power's turned on. Starting right now I'll be strong. I'll play my fight song. And I don't really care if nobody else believes. Cause I've still got a lot of fight left in me." (songwriters: Platten, Rachel / Bassett, Dave) What if nobody else believes?

Without a cellphone, post office, or carrier pigeon, a teenage Mary arrives on the edge of the village. She calls out, “Hello Auntie, Uncle, anybody home?” Do you think Elizabeth ran to embrace Mary? Luke tells us that when Elizabeth hears Mary’s hello, “the child (little John the Baptist) leaps in Elizabeth’s womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” With a loud voice she blurts out, “Oh Mary, blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! Above all women, God has blessed you and the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” How wonderful when someone joins our fight song! How beautiful to hear the harmonies of love resonate with our voice!

Mary has left behind her mother and father, perhaps fleeing, and she enters Zechariah and Elizabeth’s sanctuary with this crazy story of an angel telling her things. How will she be received? Did streams of joyous tears flowing down Elizabeth’s face? Did Zechariah, struck mute, dance a jig? They welcome Mary into the presence of God. Oh, remember the feel of the divine embrace given most often by human arms. To have someone sing with you as you dream of changing the world! Listen again to Elizabeth’s Ave Maria, as she sings: “Hail blessed one among women, blessed is the fruit of your womb! God is with us, oh babies in the womb are dancing. For happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises God made to her. Blessed is she who believes.”

Take this moment and make it holy by remembering those who believed deeply in you, who spoke words of hope when you were afraid. Blessed are they among all people. Let us lift up a beacon of hope, let us encourage those pushed to the side, running away from home, out on the edges of the church or society!Let us sing a hopeful tune. Let us not allow anyone to sing alone! Let us love our neighbors by saying to those facing the daunting task of changing the world: “Blessed is she, blessed is she, blessed is she who believes, blessed is she who dreams about making this world as in heaven! Blessed is she who believes God is with us!”

Later in the week. I found myself in Fido again, where I bumped into Ingrid McIntyre of Open Table. Ingrid greeted me with funny hyperbole of old friends, and then sang out a blessing on us today, “Hail Belmont, the Lord is with you! Blessed are you among Nashvillians, for your amazing Covenant Class is greeting refugees at the Greyhound bus station, and jumping right up from their computers to answer my email, taking down technology from 61st avenue and then installing it at  Open Table- lickly split! Hail favored ones, who believe in helping those without homes, we help out Jesus. God is with us! Hail, Paul Purdue, you lucky duck, who gets to pastor such a wonderful church, the Lord is with Belmont!” Blessed is she who believes and creates a better world!

Strengthened by Elizabeth’s embrace, Mary finds her own song. Hear her creating a new world. Hear her prophetic song that no doubt she sang to Jesus, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor in my lowest place. Oh, to imagine that generations might call me blessed. The Mighty One does great things, giving mercy from generation to generation.God scatters the proud and breaks evil thrones, God lifts up the lowly and sends the rich away empty handed, keeping covenant with us!” Oh, did Jesus sing that song on the way to the cross?

Oh, friends, even as we sometimes shake our heads and lament, “How can this be?”, let us sing with Mary, “Here I am Lord, let this Your divine plan change this world begin with me.” Let us not let Mary sing alone, but be people of sanctuary, making people feel safe and welcome, even if they seem to hear things from God that we have not! Let us embrace and encourage one another. Blessed is she who believes what God promised her. Blessed is she. Blessed is she…. God is with us! Do not be afraid! Make a run at changing this world! Be not afraid! Amen.