

## **The Church of the Good Shepherd**

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Advent 4; Luke 1:39-55

This fourth Sunday of Advent, our attention turns fully to Mary, the mother of Jesus and one of the most revered and important of the saints. As you can imagine, she had an indispensable practical role in the act of bringing our Lord into the world. But Mary also provided an essential theological pivot point in the centuries-long process of defining Christian theological orthodoxy in the developing church.

Early in Christian history, when some people denied that Jesus was truly a man, Christians pointed to the fact that he was born of a woman to emphasize Jesus' humanity. Later, when others denied that Jesus was God the Son, Greek Christians began calling Mary Theotokos, the "Bearer of God," to emphasize Jesus' true God-ship. In Mary, God gives us a sign that Jesus is both truly God and truly Man.

The Gospel of Luke gives us the remarkable account of the Angel Gabriel who approaches Mary and announces God's plans for her. Gabriel tells her that she – an unmarried very young woman in a small town in relative nowhere of Galilee – that she has found favor with God and will bear the God's Son, whom she will name Jesus. What catches my breath every time I read this story is that Mary's response to this remarkable and seemingly impossible pronouncement is not to protest and argue the obvious absurdity of this situation - a young virgin bearing the Son of God. Rather, Mary's response is to faithfully accept and receive God's will for her. Yes, she does wonder aloud how this could possibly happen. But, like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob before her, Mary's response to God's call is, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." As Theotokos, the "Bearer of God", Mary is called to walk in faith the path God has placed before her, knowing that God plans something remarkable for her and her child.

Mary's surprising and special pregnancy is also closely linked with that of her cousin, Elizabeth. Elizabeth and Zechariah were getting on in years and, to their great sorrow, had been unable to bear a child. Yet, God gifted them with a son, John, who will later be known as John the Baptizer. God's work of salvation and reconciliation is grounded upon these two women – one scandalously too old to be pregnant, the other scandalously too unmarried.

This is how Luke sets the narrative for the poetic encounter between Mary and Elizabeth in our Gospel lesson today. Following Gabriel's announcement to Mary, she, now pregnant by the Holy Spirit, goes with haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth. When Elizabeth sees Mary, she is filled with the Holy Spirit and her baby John leaps with joy in her womb. Luke says that it is then that Elizabeth is "filled with the Holy Spirit," and she praises Mary for her faith and prophetically proclaims that she is carrying the Messiah, the Lord. She then blesses Mary, saying: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?... [B]lessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

To this proclamation of blessing, Mary now responds with her own song of praise. One of the most ancient Christian hymns, Mary's song is also known as the Magnificat, which is the first word of the Latin text – or as the early Book of Common Prayer translated this first line, "My soul doth magnify the Lord." In her song, Mary proclaims God's redeeming and reconciling work in creation. She sings of the dramatic reversals that are the signs of God's in-breaking kingdom: the proud are scattered and the powerful deposed, while the lowly are exalted and the hungry are fed. God's selection of Mary as the bearer of the Messiah, as well as her virgin pregnancy, are not only signs of what is to

come but also provide a glimpse of this promised, upside-down future of God that has already begun.

In some ways we are like Mary – we, too, are Theotokos, bearers of God. In Genesis, we are told that God formed mankind in His own image. Theologians often speak of this image-making of humankind as we were soft wax and God impressed his stamp upon us. Being formed in the image of God, means that we bear God within us in a special way. It also means that as we bear this image upon our whole being, we are charged with the responsibility to live our lives faithfully and in integrity with this God-image. Babies are special reminders to us of our being formed in the image of God, for, upon them, God's formative imprinted stamp is so fresh.

Being made in the image of God means that we all must bear our God-image in this frightened and hurting world. Like Mary, we are called to great faithfulness and obedience to the God who is the creator of the universe. Our obedience leads us to respond to God's call with, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word," and our faithfulness helps us to live each day with the hope that, in God's own time, we will receive the gifts of the kingdom life. So, may we embody the fidelity of Mary, faithfully walking the path God has placed before us. And may our souls continually sing Mary's song of praise: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."

Let us pray:

*God of hope, as we prepare for the coming of your Son, nurture in us the Advent blessings of hope, peace, joy, and love. Free us to love as you love us; to forgive as you have forgiven us; and to pursue others as you so faithfully seek us. Awaken our hearts to you this day, so that when Christ arrives, we are ready to receive him with all our hearts, all our minds, and all our strength. Amen.*