

“Mary, Did You Know?”
Sermon by Lisa Crismore
December 20, 2020 – John Knox Presbyterian Church

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to 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. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Don not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, 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. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

The song “No Wind at the Window” was written by the Iona Community and music was composed by John Bell. This would be sung at the midnight mass at St. David's Church in the United Kingdom on Christmas Eve Service 2014. The first verse goes like this:

No Wind at the Window, no knock on the door
No light from a lampstand, no foot on the floor
No dream born of tiredness, no ghost raised by fear
Just an angel and a woman and a voice in her ear.

This is where we find ourselves this morning in the presence of Mary and the angel, Gabriel. This young woman, who many believe was only in her late teens, had no idea that this was going to happen to her. How would you react, if you were greeted by an angel? Perhaps, she finds comfort when the initial hello comes with “You are favored and the Lord is with you.” It is no wonder that she takes a moment to ponder these words. Does she wonder if Gabriel has the correct address? Or did he get her confused with Naomi down the street?

Another reassurance comes – “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” Mary receives this confirmation that she is the right one, when she hears her name. Again she hears, “Mary, you have found favor with God.” But wait a minute, what was the other part?

She is going to have a baby! This baby will be the Son of the Most High – God! Mary, you will name him Jesus! He will receive the throne of David and there will be no end to his kingdom. These four sentences change Mary's life forever.

We hear her utter, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” This has to be a mistake! The answer comes from the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will hover over Mary and will give her a child. This is not the only miracle that Mary hears from God's messenger. She is told that her cousin Elizabeth will, in her old age, give birth to a son.

Her response to this miraculous news is not met with a bombardment of questions. Why? Why me? Why chose a poor simple girl like me? How? How will I do this? How will those around me respond? She receives the news of being favored and blessed and responds with a simple – “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Does Mary really know what this will mean for her? I'm not sure that she will feel favored and blessed when she has to tell her parents and Joseph this news or walk through town with eyes glaring at her pregnant belly. I am not sure that she will feel favored and blessed when she takes the risk of being stoned to death. I am not sure that she will feel favored and blessed when she arrives in Bethlehem and finds that there is no space in anyone's home as her water breaks. I am not sure that she will feel favored and blessed when Joseph and her have to flee to Egypt to save their baby from Herod's soldiers. This giving birth to God's Son will take her on an emotional roller coaster throughout Jesus' life.

The Episcopal priest, Michael Marsh, shares this, "God's favor and blessing do not necessarily mean life is easy, we get our way, or we live happily ever after. It is not God's reward for right behavior or right believing. It is rather a state, a condition, a way of being. Mary's "yes" to God is not the source of or reason for her favoring and blessing. Rather, her favoring and blessing are the source and origin of and the means by which she can say "yes."

Mary understands that her favoring and blessing by God are not dependent upon or determined by the circumstances of life. So often we look at what is going on around us, the circumstances of our lives, and then declare ourselves or another to be blessed or not. Mary, however teaches us to look and live more deeply; to look beyond the circumstance of life and see God within us. The favoring and blessing of God wasn't around her. It was within her.

<https://interruptingthesilence.com/2012/03/27/theres-something-about-mary-a-sermon-for-the-feast-of-the-annunciation-luke-126-38/>

In the Sensible Shoes series by Sharon Garlough Brown, the second book, Two Steps Forward, takes place during Advent and Christmas. The character Mara has suffered years of verbal and mental abuse from many relationships resulting in very low self-esteem. Currently, she is in a bad marriage with disrespectful children. Mara tries to hide this behind her bubbly personality. She has found God through this circle of friends and her Spiritual Director. They have helped her to discover God's hope and love. During one visit with her Director, she discovers this passage from Luke. Mara realizes that God's Spirit is within her just like Mary. To hear that she is blessed and favored just like Mary is like finding gold. No matter what she has done or what life gives to her, God is there working with her and loving her. She finds the darkness of the sins she has committed be lifted and there is a restoration that begins. She also receives strength and hope to help her through whatever life throws at her. Mara takes this one-step further and tells this circle of friends at their next Bible study that she is pregnant. This definitely raises some questioning eyebrows! She goes onto explain that she is pregnant with the Holy Spirit inside of her!

We all our pregnant with the Holy Spirit inside of us. Sorry guys! You never thought that you would be pregnant! But, we have this miracle of a gift. Mary had no clue what was ahead of her. We have no idea what is ahead of us. Our lives can change at a moment's notice just like Mary. These past 10 months have been a mystery and something we would never imagine.

And yet, we hear the words, "Do not be afraid, Mary." Do not be afraid, *insert your name here*. God is within you, Mary. God is within all of us. God comes as a child in the most humble way. God comes as flesh and blood to dwell among us. Help us believe O God that we are favored and blessed even in the most challenging times. Help us believe that nothing is impossible with God.

We give praise for the vaccine that has started being administered. There is a light at the end of the Covid tunnel and we can see this dimly. We will get through it.

But, there is still devastation that will need to be restored. There are still broken lives from loss of loved ones, loss of businesses, loss of jobs, loss of relationship from isolation, all kinds of loss. Our country is still facing the need to work through systemic racism and the impact it has on people of color. Marion County is looking at breaking the record for the number of homicides in our city.

Then, there are those who are facing other illnesses, parents with Alzheimer's, broken marriages, and the sadness never stops.

So thank you God, for this story of Mary! This story that we hear every Advent and Christmas. Its familiarity gives us comfort like hearing "Happy Birthday" sung as we turn one year older; or saying the "Lord's Prayer" ever Sunday; or tasting our favorite dish that our mother makes. Mary is the one that doesn't balk at asking questions but she boldly says with faith and courage, "Here am I!" She may not know what lies ahead but knows that God will be with her every step of the way.

I have thought a lot about the babies being born this year. At first I was a little sad for them. As they grow-up, will people respond negatively to them when they find that they were born during the pandemic? Oh, what year were you born? I was born in two thousand and twenty-murmur...murmur.

I have had friends who have had grandchildren born. For the most part, their husbands could be with them through labor, delivery and the hospital stay. They just could not leave. And, younger and older siblings had to wait to meet their new baby brother or sister at home. These miracles no doubt have been a light for all who have snuggled and held them.

Recently, I heard this heart felt deliver story from one of our past seminary students who is still under care of our Presbytery. LydiaGrace Quine Espiritu-Gray gave birth to a healthy baby boy on December 4th naming him Isaiah. The thing that was touching is that her labor coach/dear friend upended her life for 22 days to be with LydiaGrace during the waiting (not knowing when he would arrive), birth and welcoming baby home. She came from Vermont to be with her in Indiana staying in a tiny Airbnb. Her dear friend had planned for all the possible scenarios hoping that all will work out. This has meant the world to LydiaGrace because she lost her mom in 2012. She can't pick up the phone or have her mom there with her to ask her all those new mom questions. She shares that when her Momma was dying she was praying that God would provide godly women to love on her daughters in a world where she could not do it herself. I've told my friend that she is an answer to that prayer and so much more.

May we never stop remembering that we are favored and blessed by God even in the most challenging times. Thanks be to God for Mary and her bold faith to face the unknown. Amen.