

## NOTHING WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD

Bishop Laurie Haller  
Advent, 2020

Iowa Annual Conference  
Luke 1:39-56 (NRSV)

Grace and peace in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ during this Advent season. Last month I was invited by the Taal United Methodist Church in Manilla Episcopal Area of the Philippines to preach a sermon on “The Songs of Christmas.” I was delighted to accept the invitation and was led to preach on Mary’s Magnificat, which was originally a song. Interspersed in the sermon are three lesser known songs that are accompanied by Deb Gillespie, to whom I am very grateful.

As you know, this is a very difficult time in the Philippines and all around the world because of COVID-19. Here in Iowa, as in many other states, many, if not most churches are not worshipping in their church buildings right now because there is too much risk of being infected with the coronavirus. It is so hard when we cannot see our church friends, but we know how important it is to just stay at home right now. The good news, however, is that, in the midst of our lament, Jesus is coming. Jesus will be born into our world once more, and he calls you and me to worship the Christ child and make a difference wherever we are. Our scripture comes from the first chapter of the gospel of Luke, verses 39-56. Listen to the word of the Lord.

<sup>39</sup> In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup> where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup> and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup> And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup> For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;  
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
 and lifted up the lowly;  
<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
 and sent the rich away empty.  
<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
 in remembrance of his mercy,  
<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”  
<sup>56</sup> And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.  
 This the Word God for the People of God.  
**This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God!**

### **Sweet Was the Song the Virgin Sang (David N. Johnson)**

Why Mary? Why did God choose Mary to be the one to give birth to Jesus? Mary was a teenager from a small, nondescript town in Israel called Nazareth, from an ordinary family where she probably helped her mother around the house and worked the fields with her father and brothers. She carried jugs of water to her home from the town well and was engaged to a local young man named Joseph.

The gospels don't say anything particularly positive about Mary. We don't even know if she was "religious" or if she went to the temple regularly. Mary didn't stand out. She wasn't anything special. She was just like you and me. And that's precisely why God chose her.

One ordinary day Mary was going about her normal chores when, in the blink of an eye, her life changed forever. An angel, Gabriel, appeared to Mary and said, "Hey! What's up, Mary? The Lord is with you."

Of course, Mary did not know what was going on, but that was to her advantage because she didn't immediately dismiss Gabriel. Because Mary knew that she was a nobody, she was open and curious as well as puzzled. Gabriel said, "Don't worry, Mary, for you have found favor with God. You are going to conceive and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He is going to be called the

Son of the Most High and will reign over the house of Jacob forever.”

Mary, God bless her, took it all in stride and asked good questions. “Okay, how is this going to happen since Joseph and I are not officially married yet?”

“Your call,” Gabriel said, “is to allow the Holy Spirit to come upon you. That’s why your child is going to be called the Son of God. Furthermore, your relative Elizabeth, who is way older than you, is also pregnant. So, if you have any more questions about how God works, just talk with Elizabeth. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

And Mary responded, “Here I am, Lord. I am your servant.” Mary said yes to God out of her nothingness. Mary was able to believe in the angel and in herself because she was well aware of her unworthiness. For the rest of her life, Mary never took credit for being the mother of Jesus because she knew it was all God’s doing. It was all because of God’s mercy.

After the angel mentioned Elizabeth, Mary knew she had to go into the hill country of Judea to seek wisdom from her older relative. When Elizabeth greeted Mary, her baby leaped in Mary’s womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, said, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

### “Jesus, Jesus Rest Your Head” (John Jacob Niles)

What a powerful confirmation of God’s call in Mary’s life. It’s one thing to hear the voice of voice of God through an angel but it’s quite another thing to have that call affirmed by another human being. At least someone understood. When Elizabeth said to this unmarried pregnant teenager, “Blessed are you,” Mary was reassured and began singing. It is one of the greatest songs in human history. We call it the Magnificat, after the first word of the song in Latin.

What can we say about the Magnificat? **First, this song is about God, not Mary.** Mary praises God by singing, “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.” Notice Mary doesn’t say, “All generations will call me blessed because I have done great things.” No, she sings, “I am blessed because the Mighty One has done great things for me.”

Mary boasts of her beauty because she knows it’s all a gift. Mary is a nobody who, by saying yes to a God who believed in her, became a somebody. Mary knows that she did not earn her status as the mother of Jesus. It’s all mercy, mercy, mercy. God gave grace to Mary, and she received it openly, willingly, eagerly. Mary let God use her to share God’s love on this earth.

And so, it is for you. God has chosen and called each one of you, unique one-of-a-kind human beings, for a special purpose. God looks with favor on you, even in your lowliness. Can you allow yourself to be an instrument of God to bring in God’s kingdom? How is God tugging at your heart right now? Can you say “yes” to God and accept the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ out of your nothingness?

**The second thing about the Magnificat is that this song is about God’s mission for Jesus in this world. And it’s about our mission as well.** What Mary is telling us here is that Jesus is going to come into the world to bring justice. From the very beginning of time, there have been people who are poor and people who are rich. We have the people who don’t count, which is the vast majority of the world’s population. These are the poor and the oppressed. Then there are the rich, the powerful, and those who have influence in our world.

Because Jesus is God’s son, Jesus takes the side of the poor. Jesus is more concerned about the little people of this world than the kings. Jesus is more concerned about people who have nothing than those who are rich. Jesus spent more time healing the sick and the outcast, ministering to the poor, and talking with women and tax collectors and Samaritans than he did with the religious leaders of the day. And they didn’t like it! They wanted Jesus to pay more attention to them!

Jesus came into a world with as many injustices as we have today. But Jesus did not ignore those who were oppressed. That's precisely where Jesus focused his ministry. And that's why the Christmas story is a bittersweet message. It's bitter because we know this sweet little baby Jesus is going to grow up to be an advocate for the oppressed, and it will cost him his life.

You see, we can't separate the birth and the death of Jesus. We celebrate his birth, knowing that death is just around the corner, and that makes us feel uncomfortable, doesn't it? We'd rather have our sweet, little baby Jesus lying in a manger and not think ahead to his death.

This song of Mary brings a very disturbing message to us. The great missionary and evangelist E. Stanley Jones said that the Magnificat is one of the most dangerous songs in the world. Why? Because the words to the Magnificat are so revolutionary that the common people and the poor people and the rejected people might riot if the words were sung. Many of us feel uneasy when we hear these words because God requires that those who have much share what we have with the least of God's children.

The angel said to Mary, "For nothing will be impossible with God." In the midst of a world where COVID-19 is taking many, many lives; in the midst of a world where injustice and oppression still exist; and in the midst of a world where so many do not even have food on their table, still we have this promise that nothing will be impossible with God.

How will you reach out to others during this season of Advent? In the midst of your own losses and your own grief, how will you be a witness to God's love? How will you reach out to the least, the last, and the lost? Each one of us needs to make our own prayerful decisions in light of Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel, her visit to Elizabeth, her revolutionary song, and God's work in our own lives. "All that I am sings of the God who brings new life to birth in me. My spirit soars on the wings of my God."

During this season of preparation for the coming of the Christ child, God has chosen you and has empowered you to show mercy, fill the hungry with good things, and bring hope to the homeless, the helpless, and the hapless. For you are Christ's coming this Advent season. Christ is coming in you today, during the days leading up to Christmas, and every day. Christ is coming in you again and again and again.

**“I Wonder as I Wander” (John Jacob Niles)**

Prayer: I am a nobody, but here I am, Lord. Fill me with your mercy. Use me to bring in your kingdom. Open my eyes to see injustice and human need with new vision and then act. Use me to change the world, for nothing will be impossible with God. Amen.