

**WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**ADVENT FOUR/DECEMBER 20, 2009**  
**PROMISES/LUKE 1:39-56**  
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**I. THE TEXT**

This morning's often ignored part of the Christmas narrative tells the joyful story of two pregnant women, Mary and Elizabeth, who meet on the front step of Elizabeth's home. After the angel Gabriel's rather unsettling visit, it is only natural that a frightened Mary would go in search of reassurance from someone who, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "has always treated her like a full-fledged person, like a friend."<sup>1</sup> Hear the story of the visitation from Luke 1...

*<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.*

**II. PRAYER:** May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock, our redeemer, our hope. Amen.

**III. THE ANCIENT STORY**

It is a wildly outrageous story... Luke begins it with a couple of childless senior citizens... Zechariah the priest and his wife Elizabeth were getting on in years but, sadly, had no children – a major source of shame in the ancient world. Elizabeth's purpose in life was to have children who would grow up to be priests... the blame fell on her. To her community and to herself, Elizabeth was a failure... Zechariah could have divorced her for it. BARREN was the label of shame she wore and the behind the back whispers would all be about pity... poor Elizabeth, what a pity.

You remember the story; one afternoon in the temple an angel came to her husband and told him that Elizabeth was going to have a son... an important son. "Name him John," the angel said... "He will prepare the way for the Messiah... and by the way Zechariah, you won't be able to speak until the day he's born." A fairly outrageous story... The stuff of tabloid news... 89 YEAR OLD WOMAN TO GIVE BIRTH... HUSBAND LEFT SPEECHLESS. Pretty unbelievable.

Luke continues the story with a young teenager all caught up in wedding plans. She was engaged to Joseph and planning on a normal sort of middle-eastern life. Well, that same angel came Mary's way one day with the news that she had found favor with God and was going to have a son... an important son. "Name him Jesus," the angel said... "he will save his people from their sins... his kingdom will never end. He will be the Messiah."

This was awfully strange good news... unwed motherhood had not gained the acceptance it has in our culture – Joseph could have divorced her for it.<sup>ii</sup> ADULTERER was the label of shame Mary would wear and the behind the back whispers would be all about scandal... "can you believe that Mary, what a disgrace." It is a pretty outrageous story... National Enquirer – YOUNG VIRGIN CLAIMS TO BE PREGNANT WITH GOD'S CHILD... ANGEL CONFIRMS STORY. Pretty unbelievable.

Mary must have been reeling as the impact of the news began to sink in... it does not feel like good news. Unsure of how to deal with the whole thing, she packs her secret and a suitcase and heads up into the hill country to the safest person she could think of... cousin Elizabeth... and two outrageous, unbelievable stories converge. Two women, one too old, and the other too young. Both pregnant, both caught up in the drama of something huge... God's unfolding plan for the universe.

It all starts out so small... so humble. As usual, it's not what we'd expect. We think of demure Mary on Christmas cards and in manger scenes, but we really don't pay a whole lot of attention to this part of her story. We so quickly skip from the angel Gabriel right to the little town of Bethlehem... this brief conversation along the way seems to be a throwaway... why did Luke even bother to include it?

Imagine what Elizabeth's words must have meant to Mary. Picture walking from here to beyond Pomona ... lots of time to think, to move back and forth between peace and panic, belief and doubt. She's pregnant... no marriage license... as Barbara Brown Taylor says, no "sonogram, or husband... no affidavit from the Holy Spirit that says, "The child is really mine. Now leave the poor girl alone."<sup>iii</sup> Imagine the anxiety and doubt. She likely replayed the scene with the angel 1000 times along the way... "You will be with child..." "You will give birth to a son..." "He will be the Messiah..." We can imagine Mary thinking, "*I must be going out of my mind.*"

She arrives tired and troubled and calls out to Elizabeth... "Elizabeth, it's Mary!" At the sound of Mary's voice... a small, but significant thing happens... Elizabeth's baby gives her a kick, and before Mary has time to unpack her suitcase or her secret, Elizabeth shouts out... "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

Now remember, this is pre-email and twitter... by the mysteries of God Elizabeth knows Mary's secret before she can even put it to words. In that mystical moment Mary's doubt and anxiety shift into joy and hope. It was what Mary needed... a sign... that's all... a little sign that the promise of the angel was not some fairy tale that she'd dreamt up after a too spicy meal. For Mary, this was it... the angel spoke truth – she would bear the Messiah. Mary is so relieved and full of joy that she explodes with a praise song of relief, of joy, of hope. "*My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*" In this brief, simple, small encounter of two beloved cousins is the sign that a very big promise would be kept, the message of the angel was true.

Perhaps that's why Luke included this tender little scene... an extraordinary event like a visit from an angel might not be enough to convince a very human young girl... but maybe the words of a dear friend could. **God's gift of a little sign along the way confirms the truth of the promise.**

#### IV. GOD AT WORK

Signs along the way to a promise are important for us, too... for we are as human as Mary and Doubting Thomas and all those other fearful, hopeful people who populate Scripture, the Scripture that makes other outrageous promises: *All things work together for good to them that love God. Those who believe in Jesus will not die but will have eternal life. Our swords will be hammered into plows and our spears into pruning hooks. The wolf and lamb shall lie down together.* Lovely thoughts – difficult to actually believe when faced with both personal and planet-wide heartache and turmoil.

But then it happens... into that doubt and disbelief of **real world** experience comes a small sign... a simple sign that lets us know that just maybe God is at work in the world. Some small event or encounter reaches inside of us and in some mystical way we come to suspect that the promises of God are more than some fairy tale or sentimental hope. They are for real. The gift of little signs along the way confirms the truth of the promise to which we are headed in just a few days – the promise of Christmas and Easter and beyond.

The gift of a little sign confirms the truth of the larger promise. When we understand that God is at work in the small things of life we begin to grasp that God is also at work in the large things... and then, hope and trust and joy take root in us, come to life in us, sometimes even explode in us... and we, along with Mary sing our own version of *“my soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior. God has stretched out his mighty arm and scattered the proud... brought down the mighty and lifted the lowly... filled the hungry with good things... God has kept the promise... is keeping the promise.”*

God's love is at work, do you see it? Can you take it in? The signs are everywhere. Sometimes we just forget to pay attention. Yesterday, Christmas dinner was delivered to over 650 families because of the generosity and labor of this community of faith. Some 75 volunteers converged on Hoffman Hall to load box after box with pumpkin pie filling, cans of corn, a box of stuffing – Christmas dinner complete with a frozen turkey... a living sign that **God's love is at work.** Do you see it? Can you take it in?

This morning [at the 11 service] we present to the three missions closest to our heart *Musical* checks totaling just under \$75,000. Westside Food Bank will turn their check into several hundred thousand meals for our community's most vulnerable – the unemployed, under-employed, the working poor who need help making ends meet... seniors on fixed incomes, the frail elderly... women and children living in domestic violence shelters... **it is a sign, God is at work.**

As ChildSHARE so beautifully puts it, “There is no such thing as an unwanted child, only unfound homes.” ChildSHARE will take their check and find loving Christian homes for 9 wanted children... **it is a sign, God is at work.**

An unemployed veteran, Tom came to People Assisting the Homeless after living under the freeway for two years. He worked his way through the P.A.T.H. program and is now a department manager at a major grocery store, living in his own apartment. There are thousands of other Toms and Lisas and Freds out there on the streets and under overpasses,

and P.A.T.H. will take their check and use it to transform a dozen more... a hand up, not a hand out... ... **it is a sign, God is at work.**

God's love is at work, do you see it? Can you take it in? Signs everywhere! The gift of little signs along the way confirm the truth of the promise to which we are headed. And when we perceive the signs, and let ourselves believe them, just like Mary, our doubt and fear make the shift to hope and joy.

Where do you see the love of God at work? The signs are everywhere.

Every time forgiveness happens.

Wherever greed gives way to a generous heart.

Whenever kindness sneaks in.

Wherever selfishness gives way to the common good.

Every time what is good and right and true pushes into the darkness.

Where do you see the love of God at work? Will you remember to look for it? The signs are everywhere.

## V. THE SIGNS

God makes promises – outrageous ones, really. Let's face it, ours is the faith of Tabloid news... GOD PUTS ON FLESH! DEAD MAN WALKS AFTER 3 DAYS IN TOMB! Pretty unbelievable. But the signs of its truth are everywhere. God is up to something – God is keeping the promise. For Elizabeth and Mary the sign came first in the shocking news from an angel, and then in the tender familiarity of two dear relatives simply visiting with each other. **If God is at work in small things, we can rest assured that God is also at work in the big things...** and what makes our life important is that we have no idea what God considers “big stuff,” or whether what we consider small will mustard-seed itself by God's grace into something remarkable. So, like Mary, we walk in hope and dread, in timidity and even temerity living as if it is certain that that day will come when our guns **will** be melted down into farm equipment and our children will not use them on each other. That day will come when the world's hungry **will** be fed and the poor will have enough. That day will come when we do greet each other as sister and brother, when our hearts smile and our arms reach across the false barriers of color or culture or creed. And so, for today, as we continue to work toward the big things, we also remember to pay attention to and tend to the small things. For what promise do you wait in this Advent season? God's promises are certain... live as if they are true. Goodness wins. Death does not. God's kingdom has come... it is among us. From Bethlehem to eternity, in spite of evidence to the contrary in any given moment... the universe is in the hands of God. God's tiny hands reach out to us from a manger... God's worn hands stretch out for us from a cross. God's loving hands hold us all the way from heaven. Advent is ending, the promise is being fulfilled. Let us keep our eyes open and discover Christmas again, and take it in. After all, the signs are everywhere.

**VI. PRAYER:** Our souls praise you O Lord, for you have done great things... you are doing great things. As we wait in this Advent season, come to us, be born in us, abide with us... our Lord Emmanuel. **AMEN AND AMEN.**

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<sup>i</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Magnificat*, in *Mixed Blessings*.

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 1:18-19

<sup>iii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Singing Ahead of Time*, in *Home By Another Way*.