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 Advent III
 Sermon 13 December 2020
 Isaiah and Mary

For Advent this year, Rev. Amy and I decided we would focus our readings and sermons on the characters we know and love from the Christmas Story. Whether it's John the Baptist and his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, to Mary and her encounter with Gabriel and then to Joseph and his encounter, we felt like these people give us comfort. And so today, as you might guess from the readings, we will highlight Mary.

The story of Mary is perhaps one of the most fascinating ones in the New Testament. We have a young girl, engaged to a man but not yet married, so... 14 maybe? People lived shorter lives and generally the moment a woman is of age to bear a child, she's getting married and having kids. Maybe she was older, maybe even younger... hard to say, but the point is she's young, teenage and now some pretty serious things are happening.

We are told that God sends his messenger Gabriel to Mary and the angel says, "You have been chosen to bear a son, he'll carry on the line of the great King David, he'll be the Son of God and will fulfill all the promises God has made. And to prove we are not kidding; your older relative Elizabeth will have a child too. 'Cause we do what we want."

Mary replies that she will do whatever is commanded and that she is a servant of the Lord. It's an incredibly assured answer. But it gets even more joyful when she visits her relative Elizabeth. They meet up and Elizabeth feels John in her womb leap for joy at greeting Mary. Elizabeth realizes something is up and that Mary will be the Mother of her God, the Theotokos as we call it in seminary. With all this great news, Mary responds by breaking out in song; they respond in verse:

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."

This Song of Mary, also known as the Magnificat, was used in the early church, like year 40 church, as a hymn. It highlights the fulfillment of promises, the deliverance of a people, and the glorification of God. And I find it all to be absolutely ridiculous.

Yeah, I said it... it's unbelievable. A teenager who knows nothing about the world is told she's pregnant and that her child will be the Son of God... and her response is "Sure thing! I am your servant." Then she goes to her relative and they break into happy song, all joyful and triumphant? This is a joke.

I'm obviously being a bit hyperbolic here, but I am serious, I struggle with this story, I find it hard to believe certain parts. Now, her being pregnant as a virgin and only engaged but unmarried. I'm fine with that. Her child is going to be the Son of God... I'm fine with that. The

fact that Elizabeth will have a child when we are told she is past the bearing age, I'm cool with that. What I'm not cool with... is their reactions to all this. I'd be freaking out, and not in a good way.

Her answer of "Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your world" is more miracle than anything else that happens. I tell people all the time that God loves them, God has chosen them, God has big plans for them, and that God has given them the power to change the world, and the response is almost never, "Great! Here I am, let's work! Do what you want with me God!" No, the answer I get is, "Oh... that's nice. I'm a bit busy right now, can we schedule another time for me to do this work? I've got too much on my plate."

Mary not only says a resounding YES when confronted with the unknown, she then goes and tells someone else about it! She doesn't just talk to someone else, she SINGS about it!!! When was the last time someone was so excited about Jesus Christ they just came to you and SANG! Probably... never. Her reactions to this news, to this amazing revelation, is just unbelievable to me... I've too much to deal with right now to even imagine such a reaction in my own life. There's a pandemic going on, more deaths every day than 9-11 or Pearl Harbor, and half the people I know think it won't bother them, that they are exceptional. There's still an election going on, months later, because no one can imagine their candidate can lose. Unemployment is skyrocketing, education is hampered, and it all just feels like a giant depressing drag, and now I'm supposed to jump for joy with Mary during Christmas Time? Lord have mercy... literally, have mercy on me, I'm not sure I can bear wearing that fake joy right now.

The Song of Mary sounds like a great ending to a long story, it references so much that God HAS done... right now, I feel like I'm more in the middle of the story, you know, when the bad guys pull out their twists and you're not sure the heroes can actually save the day. Mary isn't bringing me much comfort... I had a very different sermon just a few hours ago, but I couldn't walk away from the unease I feel. And with that unease, my mind drifted to another Christmas Character, one who isn't in the story directly, but without him, the story never even happens.

Let me tell you about... Isaiah. I'm not sure what you know or remember about Isaiah, but he's an interesting prophet to read. We bring up a lot of Isaiah during this time of year, but it's always on the backburner, I didn't even give an Isaiah reading to our lay people, but Isaiah is intertwined into our prayers, our music, and even quoted and referenced throughout the New Testament Christmas verses. Why does this prophet, some 700 years before Jesus, talk so much about the coming of a savior? Well... it's because he felt like Israel needed one. And that's what I can get behind right now, I need a savior.

Isaiah lived and prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, Kings of Judah. This is roughly 760 BC to 690 BC. During this period, the people of Israel were split in half. There was the Northern Kingdom, called Israel or Ephraim, and then Judah, in the south. Now, follow me here, I know this history can be tough, but it's important. Israel, the northern Kingdom, not the people, were separated from the south, Judah. They bickered and fought constantly and had done so for over 200 years at this point. For as long as the United States has existed, these two neighboring countries didn't get along. They spoke the same language, worshiped the same God, though they argued who did it better, and they claimed the same history. It was not good.

Then around 722 BC there arises the Neo-Assyrian Empire to the north and east. They come from the area near Babylon, they replace the Neo-Babylonian empire and start a conquest. They are led by Tiglath-Pileser III (TP3). And this guy is bad news. The Assyrian culture was known for 1 thing. Warfare. No one messed with them. If they came through, they destroyed everything, killed everyone. And not just put them to the sword, but horrible deaths. Scalping and floggings, and their favorite was flaying people alive. That's removing their skins. It was bad.

So TP3 starts coming south towards Israel and Judah, and now these two kingdoms have to make a choice. Will they team up and fight back, or go it alone? Israel, the north, team up with other nearby countries. They make an alliance with the Philistines and the Syrians, their neighbors on the coast. And they invite Judah, but the southern kingdom decides to make a deal with TP3 instead. Judah then started a war against Israel and called for help. The Assyrians come and crush the Northern Kingdom. It is laid waste, wiped away. The people of the North are either killed, enslaved and shipped across the empire, or they run for their lives into Judah. By 720, Shalmaneser V, TP3's son, had finished the invasion and the northern kingdom of Israel was gone forever.

Isaiah stood in the south and watched his kingdom abandon their brothers, and watched as God exacted a heavy vengeance against those who disobeyed his law. Isaiah knew it was only a matter of time before such devastation came south. And he was right. In 701, Sennacherib, the grandson of TP3, led an army against Judah. Isaiah encourages King Hezekiah of Judah to resist, and they are able to hold off the Assyrians with the help of Egypt. But the countryside of Judah is still damaged and the people are in chaos. Hezekiah is able to restore order for a short time but then he dies a few years later. Isaiah then disappears as well, the tradition saying that King Manasseh had Isaiah killed as a political move to garner favor with Babylon and the Assyrians.

I'm hoping in walking through this history, you can sort of imagine what life was like in Israel and Judah... it was bad. The North was wiped away, burned and decimated, entire cities burned to the ground, thousands of people tortured and murdered. Imagine watching every state north of Maryland being destroyed like that. Isaiah watched this. Then that terror came south, warfare breaking out all around. Atlanta, the biggest city, is able to hold on and resist without too much damage, but everywhere else is wrecked. Isaiah watched that in his life. Isaiah has much to say:

“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,^{4a} to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.

⁴They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

“For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing. In my faithfulness I will reward my people and make an everlasting covenant with them.

⁹ Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed.”

¹⁰ I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God.

For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

¹¹ For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.” (Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11)

Isaiah is sharing the promises of God with a Broken World, a Broken people, he is sharing promises with us. We are brokenhearted people this year, trapped in a darkness of pandemic. So many people are mourning, not just death from COVID, but loss of normal life, so many personal sacrifices. So much has been devastated about our lives, so much left in ruins. We need the Hope that Isaiah is preaching about.

And here is the kicker... it's Mary who affirms this hope, it's Mary who affirms the promise, it's Mary who proves it to be true... it's Mary who makes me believe now. It is Mary, in her joyful singing, in her willingness to say YES when I know I would not... It's joy in the face of oppression, Israel was no stranger to the heartache of politics, death, and changing lives. From Assyrians, to Babylonians, to Persians, to Greeks, to Romans, all turning over the life of Israel... not so different than Economic Crashes, Pandemics, Elections, and whatever else we've got going on today. But no matter, in the face of that, Mary brings the crown of beauty and oil of joy to be poured abundantly on our heads. She brings the clothing of praise, salvation, and righteousness. From here is the seed of Jesse's Tree, an Oak of Righteousness on which we can cling to and bear any storm.

Oh, it's more believable than I thought... maybe it's not just that I believe it... it's that we need it. Isaiah has lived that hard life and watched the world fall apart, and yet he shared God's promise even in the darkest times. Mary was given an impossible situation and life, and she embraced it with joy, because she saw those Promises, made so long ago, coming to fruit, borne in her womb.

“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”

Mary is the comfort we need right now. A burst of Joy because she sees the promise, not in the future, not even in her present. No, she sees what God has already done and KNOWS that this is a wonderful and glorious thing, and that God has so much more in store for us all. So, grab that Joy with abandon this season. No matter how dark your world, the LIGHT is still shining and will shine brighter still.