**December 21, 2014 – 4th Sunday of Advent**

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Today we got a double dose of the Gospel of Luke, first in the Magnificat, which we read in place of a psalm, and then in the Gospel itself. And they are both, not surprisingly on this 4th Sunday of Advent, four days before Christmas, all about Mary, the mother of Jesus.

It’s from Luke that we’ll hear our beloved, familiar Christmas story this Wednesday, as we do every Christmas Eve. This is because it’s the only one we have. Mark and John don’t have birth narratives at all, and Matthew’s focuses more on Joseph and the three wise men than on Mary and Jesus. So Luke it is.

And it’s a beautiful story – one we treasure and one most of us know almost by heart. And it starts with Mary. This is her shining moment.

The story starts out like this. Mary is a young Jewish girl, who has just become engaged to a nice carpenter named Joseph. She’s sitting in the garden one day, minding her own business, probably reading the Nazarene version of Modern Bride, when all of a sudden the angel Gabriel appears to her.

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” Well, you can imagine her reaction. There she is, dreaming of catering and wedding favors, when this really scary creature swoops in to tell her God is with her. Maybe Gabriel realized that he should probably have eased into the conversation because the next thing he says is, “Don’t be afraid, Mary.”

However it worked out, Gabriel finally got down to the business at hand. “Guess what, Mary,” he tells her, “God really, really loves you and you’re a good girl, so you’re going to have a baby! Who, incidentally, is going to be the savior of the world! 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 be no end. Great news, huh?”

Well, Mary didn’t just fall off of the turnip truck yesterday, and she raises the logical objection that she’s never been with a man so how can that work.

“Oh, no problem,” says Gabriel, “God’s got that covered. Literally, hah hah – a little Holy Spirit joke there! The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and bada boom, bada bing, you’ll be pregnant!”

I think Mary’s next response tells us as much about her as anything. Rather than saying, “You’re a loony and I’m calling the police,” or just running into the house screaming for her mother, she calmly says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Once the logistics are explained to her, she doesn’t object, she doesn’t fight it, she just trusts in God and goes with it. I sometimes think that Mary doesn’t get enough credit for her faithfulness, starting right at the beginning.

The word she uses for servant is “*doulé*” which means slave. Some translations use “handmaid of the Lord,” which kind of sounds to me like she does the Lord’s nails or something. Even “servant” doesn’t sound as dedicated as “slave” does. Mary is basically saying that God’s will is her will in this, which is a pretty big thing.

So now we have a gap of eight verses between our Gospel story and the Magnificat, or as some call it, Mary’s Psalm. Luke tells us that Mary heads off in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth. I can imagine any number of reasons for speed here. Perhaps she wanted to get away to think things over and figure out a way to tell her fiancé. Or maybe she wanted to see for herself that her elderly cousin really was pregnant, too, and perhaps compare notes on holy child bearing. The word for haste that Luke uses here means speed but it also means enthusiasm and diligence. So we don’t know why.

All we know is that Mary visits her cousin and has the holiness of her barely-an-embryo confirmed as Elizabeth says (well, shouts at the top of her lungs, actually), “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” That probably sounds familiar to those of you with Roman Catholic backgrounds, because it’s part of the traditional Hail Mary.

And in response, Mary composes a song on the spot.

*My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.*

*For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden.*

*For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.*

I kind of like the old fashioned words, but however you say it, once more Mary fearlessly declares her faith in God. And not just in words. Her soul and her spirit are exalting and rejoicing in her lord and savior. This song is coming from the very center of her being.

Then she goes on in a more prophetic voice:

*He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.*

*He has shown the strength of his arm, he has scattered the proud in their conceit.*

*He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.*

*He has come to the help of his servant Israel, for he has remembered his promise of mercy – the promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children for ever.*

There’s a lot contained in these few verses and the way they’re written makes a definitive statement. Luke uses the past tense, but that’s a little misleading because it makes it seem like these are things that have only happened in the past. But the tense he uses is called the aorist tense, which is something we don’t have in English. It often is used a simple past tense, but it really indicates actions that are definite and specific, no matter when they happened.

Before your eyes start to roll back in your head, let me just say that these are actions that God has both already done but also definitely WILL do. This is not just rehashing the past on Mary’s part – these are promises for the future.

And what a set of promises! Let’s look at them a little closer.

*He has shown the strength of his arm, he has scattered the proud in their conceit.*

“Scattered the proud in their conceit,” is one of those lines that we tend to gloss over because it doesn’t make too much sense on the surface. The “proud” being referred to here are those who think they are higher than God, or know better than him. And what’s being translated as conceit here is literally, “the understanding of their hearts.” So, to restate this, once the proud know-it-alls get an idea of the true power of God, their very wits will be scattered. This goes for proud know-it-alls, too in the Church, too! The only way to truly know God is through humility.

*He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.*

“Casting down” is really too polite a word for what’s meant by the word used here. It’s more like “utterly destroyed,” or “scorched earth.” This is a poke in the eye of the Romans, for sure, but just think about how the power brokers and world leaders in our world today would be shaking in their expensive, hand-made, Italian leather boots if they thought this might really happen. But they don’t worry too much about it, because they’re too proud and sure of their own power.

*He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.*

This is pretty self explanatory – the tables will be turned on the rich of the world, and the rich, in turn, will know what it means to be truly hungry. But it’s more than just payback. It’s a true turnaround in a world where today the poor and hungry are marginalized and vilified.

In her prophetic voice, Mary recognizes what we all can see if we look hard enough – that the thing that is making these promises happen is that little tiny, almost just a thought of a baby, growing inside her. She recognizes that, along with the morning sickness and the social awkwardness of being pregnant out of wedlock, she is carrying the hope of the world.

This is what the final message of Advent is to us – the hope of the world. The hope that all of the man-made structures that cause and maintain injustice and inequality in our world, along their nasty counterparts fear and prejudice, are powerless before the power of God.

This is my prayer for all of us as Advent draws to a close – that we, like Mary, in all faithfulness, recognize that hope was born, and is being born, into the world for all of us this and every Christmas. Hope for peace, hope for justice, and above all, hope for mercy from a God who loves us so much that he gave his only son – Mary’s son – for us.

Amen.