

## **“Here I Am”**

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Texts: Isaiah 7:14; 9: 2-7 and Luke 1: 46-55

I'm sure you have heard of Mary. No, not Mary Magdalene, but Mary, the mother of Jesus. She's been in every Christmas play since Jesus' birth. Of course, that's about the only place you'll see her, so you may not know her as well as you think. Me either. You see, our Bible doesn't tell us much about Mary. We see her in the birth narratives, especially in Luke's Gospel, and we see her as one of those at the cross, watching her son crucified. When we do hear of Mary, it we're told that she is "pondering" things: like Jesus not being with the family after a day's travel, only to be found in the temple. Further, we have romanticized her role. She is thought to be this fair maiden who willingly followed God's plan, and everything went swimmingly well for her. She is sweet and kind and our mental image of her is holding her baby, again, in every Christmas play we've ever seen.

It is not that some of those images aren't true, but there is so much more to Mary than we are knowledgeable about. First, Mary is young, and while it may have been more normal in those days for teens to be betrothed and have

children, she still is likely around sixteen years old. Imagine yourself at 16, visited by an angel, told you are going to have a baby (firmly in the knowledge you haven't taken part in activities that cause birth), and that he will be the savior of the world. In Luke's version of the story, you visit your relative, Elizabeth, only to find out that this older lady is going to have a baby as well. Her unlikely pregnancy is going to produce one who will "prepare the way" for your son. In the words of Brian McLaren, "Elizabeth had a young relative named Mary. Mary was engaged but not yet married. Significantly, she was a descendant of King David, whose memory inspired the hope of a David-like king who would bring the better days long hoped for among her people. When Elizabeth was about six months pregnant, an angelic messenger – the same one who appeared to Zechariah [Elizabeth's husband], it turns out – now appeared to Mary. 'Greetings favored one!' he said. 'The Lord is with you!' Mary felt, as any of us would, amazed and confused by this greeting." Yeah, no kidding!

Pregnancy was going to bring a lot of problems for Mary. What would Joseph think? He would have to assume that she had cheated on him. He would be angry. He could have her killed, or at least dismissed. She would be even more poor and destitute than she already was. And, she'd have a child to boot! Confused and amazed. Well, I guess so!

Thankfully, Joseph does not dismiss or otherwise harm Mary. They have the child, as Luke's story suggests, in a stable. You've heard this story. Now, have you been to a stable? Not the best place to have a baby! Is another hurdle we sometimes forget when it comes to Mary's life. And then to be visited by shepherds...usually not smelling too good, and usually not the kind of company folks kept. The Christmas carols even tell us that Jesus, "no crying he makes." Not sure that's true. Even for those of us who have had the best babies in terms of sleep schedule, crying, etc. have experienced a child crying, especially at birth.

Then, in Matthew's Gospel, we hear that Mary and Joseph, and the baby must run for their lives to spare Jesus from the killing hands of King Herod. More about that next week but suffice it to say that any of us who have traveled with a baby know it's difficult, and we weren't walking as they likely were. Substitute a donkey if you want to, but still an arduous task.

Jesus doesn't seem like a picnic to raise, either. Staying behind when he was a teenager, considered a rebel and a heretic by both church and state, stirring up trouble, even in his own hometown. I guess Mary did have a lot to ponder. Through it all, she remained faithful to her calling, to her son, and to something much greater than herself. We do a disservice when we romanticize the whole

thing. The truth is that it is tough to be faithful. It isn't popular like we seem to think, and there is a lot of hardship. Everything, not just the birth, seems impossible, especially for one so young and relatively poor. This is one place the Catholics have one up on us, as they recognize the sacrifice that Mary made to birth and raise Jesus. And that is before the crucifixion.

McLaren asks if that is the point of the birth stories in Luke's Gospel. Are they just to challenge us to blur the line between what we think is possible and what we think is impossible? Perhaps. "[But]," he says, "the actual point of these pregnancy stories – however we interpret their *factual* status – is a challenge to us all: to dare to hope, like Elizabeth and Mary, that the seemingly impossible is possible. They challenge us to align our lives around the 'impossible possibilities' hidden in this present, pregnant moment." I would add that they also show us that just because we or someone else looks young (or old), weak (or strong), rich (or poor) doesn't have a lot to do with what they can accomplish in God's mission here on earth.

Mary sings the beautiful *Magnificat* in our scripture this morning. I have no clue what tune might have been used with it, but it starts this way: 'My soul magnifies the Lord,

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

<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favour 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.

How can she sing in this way, given what is ahead of her? And what might that mean for us?

Faithfulness begins with the affirmation that God looks down with favour on us, and that God has done wonderful things for us. Surprisingly, this is difficult for people to understand. They see God as angry, demanding, judgmental, even mean. And yet, Mary reminds us of what we've been told before, that God looks upon us with favour. And, that God has a calling for each one of us. No exceptions. It may look impossible to do what God has set upon your heart, but look what Mary faced? When she declared that she was going to go through with this, look at what was in front of her! It wasn't a romantic, sweet, calm, serene life. No, a life of faith can look impossible, and the road ahead unclear.

"Mary presents herself to the Holy Spirit to receive and cooperate with God's creative power. She surrenders and receives; she nurtures and gives her all...because she dares to believe the impossible is possible. Her son Jesus will

consistently model her self-surrender and receptivity to God, and he will consistently prefer the insightful kindness of motherhood to the violent blindness of statehood. That's what it means to be alive in the adventure of Jesus. We present ourselves to God – our bodies, our stories, our futures, our possibilities, even our limitations. 'Here I am,' we say with Mary, 'the Lord's servant. Let it be with me according to your will.'

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.