

From Generation to Generation Sermon Series
Naming the Future – Luke 1:39-56
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As a kid, there were a lot of days I got excited about: the last day of school, my birthday, opening day of baseball season. But one my favorite days of the year was the day the JC Penney's catalog arrived in our mailbox. Kids, imagine they took everything you can buy on Amazon and put it in a book! That's a catalog. The Penney's catalog had to weigh at least 20 pounds, and I would heave it up onto my lap and flip past all the boring parts like power tools and women's underwear – yuck! – until I got to the toy section. Then, ball-point pen in hands, I would start circling the remote control cars and action figures that were on my Christmas wish list. I would envision all the creations I could build with those new Lego blocks or the explosions I could cause with a chemistry set. For me, the Penney's catalog was a glimpse into the potential joy of a dream I hoped would come true.

Of course, now that I'm an adult, I look forward to this time of year because it means experiencing a different kind of joy: the joy of Christ's birth, which brings with it hope and love and the promise of new life. I realize now that Christ is greater than any gift I could find in the toy section of the Penney's catalog. My pastor friend David Shirey calls my catalog-perusing behavior "running your fingers through the prospect of promises fulfilled." The prospect of promises fulfilled. The expectation that what you hope for will indeed happen. As David says, to be expecting is truly one of the blessings of Advent.

It may be difficult to feel expectant in today's world because the future seems so unknown. From foreign wars to the ongoing destruction of the planet to new viruses and variants, the future is highly uncertain. I always think of the comment my friend once made when we saw the local fortune teller had gone out of business. He said, "She should have seen that coming." When things seem so bleak, if we could know what's going to happen, would we even want to know?

Mary didn't have a choice. The angel comes to her and tells her that she is going to have a baby. That's a little bit more significant than a chemistry set, but no less explosive. She listens to the angel flip through the pages of her future: she'll be an unwed, pregnant, teenage mother, carrying within her womb the son of God. And Mary simply responds, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord." She then rushes off to be with her relative Elizabeth, who has also found out that despite her old age, she is expecting a baby who will grow up to be John the Baptist.

So here's the scene: an older woman beyond child-bearing years who is enduring a risky pregnancy that could threaten her life and the life of her child, and a younger woman facing harsh social criticism and banishment for being unwed and pregnant. This is not a casual visit between two women in happy circumstances. This scene is ripe for tense words of desperation and anguish, for questions like "What do we do?" and "Why us?" and "What's going to happen?" And yet, we hear, "Blessed are you among women!" "When I heard you the baby in my womb leaped for joy." "My soul glorifies the Lord." Those are hardly the words of two women facing such anxious unknown futures, not to mention swollen ankles and morning sickness. Why are these women so happy?

I would submit to you that it is because of the prospect of promises fulfilled. As Elizabeth says, "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" They were in the midst of what Dr. Virginia Hoch called a "stable time." That doesn't mean

“stable” in the sense of steady or constant or secure. Mary and Elizabeth’s situation was far from stable in that sense. But what Dr. Hoch meant by “stable time” was a time when we can glimpse God breaking into our world, as God does at the stable in Bethlehem. Mary and Elizabeth, as they met to share their divine secrets, were experiencing a “stable time.”

Mary is so overwhelmed with joy that she bursts into song. That’s a fairly common occurrence at this time of year. Radio stations are already tinseling up the airwaves with all our Christmas favorites. There’s actually a game called “Whamageddon,” in which you see who can go the furthest into the Christmas season without hearing the song “Last Christmas” by the 80s pop group Wham! I lost on Dec. 1. That tune is so darn catchy that I can’t help bursting into song when I hear it. I think I can escape it, then I walk into Walgreen’s and Wham! There it is.

Mary’s song, which packs its own kind of punch, is what we have come to know as the “Magnificat.” German theologian Deitrich Bonhoeffer calls it “the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung.” Mary’s song details God’s grace and mercy to her, and the promises God has made through the prophets. In fact, almost every word in Mary’s song is a biblical quotation from the Old Testament, which Mary, as a Jew, would have heard her whole life. Her song echoes the prophets with its theme of redemption, freedom, and justice.

I want you to notice something interesting about the Magnificat. She starts off in the present tense – “My soul magnifies the Lord” – but quickly shifts to the past tense – “He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.” These past-tense promises Mary sings about were believed to be fulfilled with the coming of the Messiah, who had yet to be born. What Mary is doing is singing about these promises in the past tense as if they have already happened. Before she was even pregnant, she was expecting. She’s running her fingers through the prospect of promises fulfilled. She’s naming the future she sees because the birth of Jesus.

The book of Hebrews tells us that faith is “assurance of things hoped for,” and Mary is expressing her assurance in one simple fact: God will do what God says. It would have been easy for Mary to doubt this. In many ways, her situation was one of the last places you’d expect God to show up. An impoverished land, a backwater village, a run-down stable, a teenage mother, a poor child’s birth. You can’t put that on a Christmas card, but that’s what it was. And yet, as Mary says, “the Mighty One has done great things for me.” In the midst of all her struggle, she celebrates, she sings.

We can learn from Mary’s sense of trust and faith, but it’s especially comforting for those who find Christmas to be less than a joyous time of year. Because this is a festive season, if you are anything other than bubbling with Christmas cheer, you may think there’s something wrong with you. “I shouldn’t feel this way; it’s Christmas!” But for some of us, the reality is that this is the first Christmas without a loved one who died, or this Christmas is a reminder of the struggle to buy even a few presents, or it marks the ending of another year of spinning your wheels or enduring small failures that continually add up. It’s easy to forget the future promises of God when our past and our present seem stacked up against us.

If you wonder how God can be present to you as you struggle with your pain, look at the characters of the Christmas story: an older woman who had given up hope of having a child; a young woman, unmarried and pregnant; the socially outcast shepherds who are the first invited to see the Christ child. Christ’s coming is not a pie-in-the-sky promise that all will be well; it’s a very real promise that God is coming again to bring us healing, assurance, and peace. In spite of the evidence, we are called to live out our faith, to trust that God will do what God says, that

Christ's birth will make a difference in our lives and in our world. This Advent, we are called to be expecting.

When we do so, we take our place alongside Mary and Elizabeth as those who bear God into this world. And our role in this story being told again is in some ways just as important. Listen to these words from medieval mystic Meister Eckhart: "We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place each year but does not take place within myself? And what good is it to me that Mary is full of grace if I am not full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and culture?" When we live with expectation of God's inbreaking into our world, we are boldly speaking past-tense action into future circumstances. God has fed the hungry; God has provided toys for kids in need; God has broken down barriers and crossed borders. When we are expecting God to act, we are naming the future, speaking into existence what we know to be true about God.

Are those promises true? Can they be trusted? As God-bearers, as people called to bring the light of Christ into the world, it is up to us. Will God's mercy extend to others? Will the humble be lifted up? Will the hungry be filled with good things? We can wait around for God to do these things, but I believe God would say, "I've already sent you everything you need. What are you waiting for?" We have the power to name the future, to say what we believe God will do because we know God's promises are good and we have the power to fulfill them, because of the incarnation of God into this world, because of Immanuel. God is with us.

Mary and Elizabeth believed that God was with them, as well. Their faith allowed them to see that God had not abandoned them to their troubles but was working in them and through them to bring new life. They believed that, in spite of the potential despair of their circumstances, God was present with them. Do they understand what's going on? No. But they believe in God's promises. Running their fingers through the prospect of promises fulfilled. Assurance in things hoped for.

As we move forward into unstable times, may we remember the importance of stable time, time spent in the midst of the Christmas miracle, time invested in helping Christ be born again in our hearts and in this world. Look into the future. What do you see? There's a lot I don't see, maybe some things I don't want to see. But I do see Jesus. I know Jesus will be there. And that's enough. Enough to transform our hearts, our community, this world. Enough to bind the wounded hearts and fill the empty stomachs and shine a light in the dark places. How do I know? Immanuel. God is with us.