

Sermon – “Much Perplexed”  
Sunday, December 20, 2020  
Scripture Lessons: Luke 1:46-55, Luke 1:26-38  
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The first scripture reading is Mary’s song of wonder and joy, known as the Magnificat, found in the gospel of Luke 1:46-55. The deep sense of apprehension voiced the First Sunday of Advent has given way to a mood of great joy and expectation this Fourth Sunday. Beyond the astonishment of being the “favored one” who will literally bring God’s son into the world, Mary’s wonder and joy is grounded in the realization that the kingdom of God, which this One brings, is one of justice, equity and peace. Hear now God’s holy word.

*46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name. 50 God's mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. 51 God has shown strength with God's arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 God has helped God's servant Israel, in remembrance of God's mercy, 55 according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." Amen.*

Our second scripture, Luke 1:26-38, provides the setting for Mary’s song, which we just read together. Listen now for God’s word to us on this day.

*26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 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. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.*

The title of the sermon: “Much Perplexed”

Let us pray. Loving and Holy God, we marvel that you would join us in our humanity through a miraculous birth, becoming one of us in the Christ-child. Give us courage and wisdom when we find ourselves, as Mary did, in perplexing circumstances. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

*But Mary was much perplexed by Gabriel’s words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.* We can almost feel the disbelief in Mary’s voice upon hearing the news that she will bear a child. The literal meaning of the greeting “O Favored One” is a person who is graced by God. Mary also learns from Gabriel that God is with her. She is not alone in the perplexing “good” news that she will give birth to a child.

The logistics make this reality impossible. Although she is engaged to a man whose name is Joseph, Mary is a virgin. In retrospect, this may be good news; however, at the time it was daunting news for Mary. Any woman who receives word of an unexpected pregnancy understands what Mary was feeling and the stigma of being an unwed mother in first century Palestine surely added to Mary’s fears and concerns.

The paragraph in the gospel of Luke between Gabriel’s visit to Mary and Mary’s song of praise (our first reading) is an essential dimension to the story because it provides a place of healing and coming to terms with the circumstance in which Mary finds herself. Mary leaves the small town of Nazareth to spend time with her cousin Elizabeth who is also expecting an impossible birth. During this time of reflection, prayer, and counsel, Mary comes to understand the honor which is hers and the importance of the work God has called her to do.

Elizabeth, who is old and unexpectedly with child, will give birth to John the Baptist. Her son will close an old age. Mary, who is young and unexpectedly with child will give birth to Jesus. Her son will usher in the new age. Luke is offering a historical reminiscence and making a theological point by placing these two birth narratives side by side.

Mary accepts her circumstance and opens her heart to mystery and to grace, knowing she is not alone. When we find ourselves in circumstances that perplex us and we ask the same question Mary asked, “How can this be?” –may we have the wisdom to reflect as Mary did, to see our part in the circumstance in which we find ourselves and to open our hearts to mystery and to grace. May we never stop wondering how God is working within our circumstance and what relationship they have to the larger picture of God’s effort within our lives and within the world?

During the spring of Paul’s junior year at Hope College, he spent a semester in Washington, D.C. where he worshipped at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. At this same church, President Lincoln regularly worshipped as he traversed the challenges and perplexities of the Civil War and emancipation. This congregation’s recently retired pastor, the Rev. Dr. Roger Gench, shares with us poignant theological reflections on Mary’s predicament in this week’s *Presbyterian Outlook*:

He writes: “As Mary well knew, life has a way of bearing down on us, even humiliating us, and when we find ourselves in these places, we are reminded that stand-alone self-sufficiency is an illusion.

Yet in “Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account,” Dr. Kristine Culp of the University of Chicago Divinity School contends that vulnerability is the pivot of salvation — the point at which salvation occurs. This notion is hard to grasp because nobody wants to be vulnerable. We want to be strong and self-sufficient.

Yet in Advent we ponder the mystery of incarnation, the mystery that God risked the vulnerability of becoming human, born to Mary, in order to restore us to our rightful place as bearers of the image of God. The proximity of vulnerability and salvation is God’s way of redeeming the whole creation.

This kind of vulnerability and solidarity is not often on display in our world — one in which the prideful retain their positions by humiliating others, and the humiliated long for revenge. In fact, at first blush, Mary’s Magnificat might sound a bit vengeful when she sings of a God who has ‘brought down the powerful from their thrones,’ ‘lifted up the lowly,’ ‘filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty’ (Luke 1:52-53). Yet Rev. Dr. Sharon Ringe in her commentary on Luke notes that a leveling, rather than reversal, is in view as God’s action moves us to a common middle ground — as ‘an economy marked by competition is replaced by an economy of generosity in which all have enough.’ In other words, a prideful world where winner takes all is transformed into one in which all have a place at the table. This is Luke’s vision for the world: the humiliated are restored to their rightful place and the prideful must make way for others.” (pause)

That first Christmas, although perplexing, was a joyous and poignant time for Mary and Joseph and one with tender moments. It was a time of surrender, a time of vulnerability and salvation, and a time to trust in the God with whom all things are possible. It was a time to embrace their humanity and to celebrate the God who enters into the cold and lonely places in our world to be there with us.

Let us not over-romanticize the birth of the Christ child. When we do this, our temptation is to deny Christ’s humanity and vulnerability. And then, when our own lives become difficult and unromantic, we forget we have a God who understands our circumstances. We forget we have a God who comforts and upholds us when we feel most alone and vulnerable.

When we find ourselves “much perplexed” in the circumstances of our lives, may we remember that with vulnerability comes salvation and may we celebrate the God who levels and straightens the crooked places and gives all a place at the table. Amen.