

## Unexpected Hope

Since Reverend Sue talked about *A Charlie Brown Christmas* last week, I figure I can talk a little bit about my favorite Christmas movie this week: *A Muppet Christmas Carol*. I'm a child of the 90s and when this movie came out in 1992, I was the perfect age for the muppets and the singing and the movie effects that did not age well. I love it for its charm, but as I watched it again this week, I loved it anew for its story. *A Muppet Christmas Carol* catches the heart of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and Michael Caine is my favorite Scrooge. There is nothing like watching him go from a curmudgeon who can't find a word for even Kermit the Frog to learning to dance with the Ghost of Christmas Present and, finally, watching him walk out into the world after realizing, as Gonzo the narrator tells us, that, "His life had been laid out before him, and it could be changed." I needed some of that kind of Christmas cheer after the week we've had.

Because it has been quite the week, friends, hasn't it? For those of you who follow the news, there have been some high-profile announcements and resignations and changes in plans and policy and I think that many of us wish there was some way that we could influence what's happening in Washington, to change it for the better, to get rid of the chaos and to clear the pathway for good governance. And we want some way to do that that's not the hard work of thinking through policy, talking to our members of congress, voting, and getting other people to care enough to vote too. We want a miracle. We could use one. It feels like we won't get peace any other way.

If you were going to do that, though, what would you do? If you wanted to change the way the world worked, who would you talk to? Surely it would be someone in power, someone with authority. You would want to get the ear of someone who can make change happen, and convince them to be more loving, to be kinder, to advocate for policies that will help all of us. You're probably going to want to send an angel or something to someone in a suit and tie with an office downtown.

And of course, that's what we would expect someone who wanted to influence Rome to do as well. Get someone in the emperor's court on your side. We all know how fickle world leaders are, how they're held under the sway of their advisors. If you want to change the Roman Empire, you're going to want to get in with Caesar. That's how this world works, whether it's ancient Rome or modern-day Washington. You have to play the game. We know that's what's got to be done.

How silly it is, then, for God to have chosen a teenage girl to change the world. A teenage girl with no connections, no leader's ear bent to her will. A poor girl from the middle of nowhere, whose best-case-scenario is getting married, having a son, and keeping the household for her husband until he dies and her son is able to take care of her. If Jesus were to come to Earth today in the United States, Mary would be from West Virginia, or a reservation in South Dakota, or a border town in Texas, or Flint, Michigan. We would not notice her, just like no one noticed her then.

Well, no one except for the angel Gabriel, who visits her in the passage just before the one we read for today. Gabriel appears to Mary and says, "Rejoice, highly favored lady! The Lord is with you!"

Highly favored? Lady? Mary? Daily life in Nazareth is a struggle against hunger and unfair taxes. In what way has she been favored? Mary is confused by these words, wonders what sort of greeting this is.

Gabriel responds to this by telling her to not be afraid, which helps, I'm sure. He then tells her that she's going to have a son, and that son is going to be a king of a kingdom without end.

Mary keeps her cool and thinks through her situation. She asks, "How is this going to happen? How am I supposed to have a baby without having sex? I haven't known a man like that."

Gabriel is ready with an explanation. "The Holy Spirit will come over you, because the one who is to be born will be holy. Look, even Elizabeth, your cousin, the one who spent her long life thinking that she would never have a child, is six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God."

Nothing is impossible for God. Mary chews this over. She thinks about where she's from, all the poverty and sickness and death, and thinks about what kind of kingdom her son will bring about. If he's going to be a holy one, then maybe he'll actually make a better world. "Okay," she says. "Okay. I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me as you said." And it is. And Gabriel goes.

Now, we have no confirmation that this visit from an angel is real, no proof that it wasn't just the delusion of a teenage girl, until Mary goes to visit Elizabeth. It's still just the word of a woman, but Elizabeth feels the baby inside her jump when Mary shows up. It is such an insignificant event, two mothers-to-be meeting. My

cousins did the same a few years ago when they were both pregnant, one with her third, the other with her first. The most that came out of it was a facebook post.

But Elizabeth knows that there's something more significant here. Something special, something miraculous has happened to Mary. The baby in her knows it too, and Elizabeth knows the miracle that her own baby is. "Why do I have this honor?" she asks Mary, "that the mother of my Lord should visit me? Happy, blessed is she who believed that the Lord would fulfil all promises!"

Let's pause here, with these two happy and blessed women speaking to each other, to think again about who Mary is. We have already seen her stand up to an angel, boldly asking this fear-inducing heavenly being questions about how, exactly, God is going to use her in this plan. We can guess that Mary, even though she's a teenager who's probably only rarely if ever left her village, has already been through a lifetime of stress and strain, living where she does. These two things tell us that she must have some chutzpah. And Elizabeth has called her "happy" or "blessed." The Greek work is μακάρια, and that root, μακ, means "to make long or large." Someone becomes μακάριος when God stretches out and reaches to them God's grace or favor. Elizabeth is using a word that, in other days, would have meant, "Mary, God has made you great!"

And so what does this bold teenager, full of chutzpah, do with being told that God has blessed her, has made her great? The CEB fails us here, because what Mary says is, "My soul magnifies the Lord!" Magnifies, the Greek word being Μεγαλύνει, literally meaning, "makes great." My *soul* makes the *Lord* great, Mary says, and I rejoice with all that I am.

She goes on to explain what she's feeling to Elizabeth, and as she does, she sounds a lot like Hannah, who we heard about a month ago. God has seen me, Mary says. God knew where I was, what my life was like, and God favored *me*! The mighty one has done great things for me and everyone will call me blessed. Me. Not Caesar, or Herod, or even David, the great king of the past. Me. Mary.

God has done mighty things for me and not only for me, but for everyone, from generation to generation, all who know God to be God, God shows mercy to them. And we know God can do it. We have seen how strong God is. We know that the proud, the arrogant, those Romans who are in charge, God can pull them down from their high places and lift up people like you and me, Elizabeth. God has kept all the promises made to our ancestors and he's done it again. God has done this wonderful thing for me and God will do more. God will fill up the hungry with

good things, but the rich, who already have more than they should, God will send them away empty. We know that God's remembering the mercy God promised to us, the mercy that was promised to us forever.

This is Mary's prayer. It's not just the humble prayer of the obedient. It has some bite to it. If God is going to change this world, Mary has a prayer for how it's going to happen.

If Mary were living in the United States today, out in the country or on a reservation or in a border town or in the inner city, what would her prayer look like? Who would she be thinking of when she says that God has pulled the powerful down from their thrones? Who is she thinking of when she says that God has lifted up the lowly? Take a minute, and write things down if that helps you think, and try to imagine the world that Mary is praying for.

You see, Mary is laying out our world in front of us, an unexpected world, a world where there are rich and poor, great and lowly, and a world where *God chooses the lowly*. When God wanted to change the world, God didn't reach out to Caesar or anyone in his court. God reached out to a teenage girl, from the middle of nowhere, and showered favor on her. The hope of all the nations entrusted to the most unexpected of vessels. And Mary herself tells us what this hope is. It's the same as Scrooge's, after his life was laid out in front of him. It is hope that things can change.

On Tuesday, we'll celebrate the birth of that hope. We'll celebrate God come to earth, God who put on flesh, God who stepped into the body prepared for him and who lives in the world today, through you and through me. Jesus, born in Bethlehem of Judea, coming from the least, will be the one who changes everything, the one who casts down the proud and lifts up the lowly.

Is that the Christmas that you've been preparing your hearts for? In this journey through advent, is this the Christmas you've been waiting for? Or is it a little unexpected?

If it is, you're not alone. But my prayer for us, for all of us, is that we are able to welcome the Christ child into this world on Tuesday, ready and eager for the change he longs to bring, a change that bends the world toward justice and kindness and love and life abundant. Amen.