

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – December 13, 2020 – The God Who Acts
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and Luke 1:46b-55

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

- 1 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
- 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
- 3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion —
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
- 4 They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
- 8 For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
- 9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
- 10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
- 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,

so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

Luke 1:46b-55

46b My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his 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 his name.
50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

“Did you hear about the man in a depressed region of Appalachia, a coal miner out of work for months, who caught his children on the back porch thumbing through a Sears catalog, wishing? He flew into a rage, switched their legs, tore the catalog to bits, and sat down in his yard and wept. Having seen so many of his own hopes unfulfilled, he just could not stand to see his own children wishing for more.”¹

¹ Will Willimon, *Lectionary Sermon Resource, Year B, Part 1* (Abingdon Press, 2017), 25-26.

Then again, “Did you read in the Bible about the young woman in a depressed region of Judea, a poor, unmarried mother-to-be who was caught wishing for more?”

² Not only was she wishing. She was singing. And though I don’t know the tune, the message is as powerful today as it was some two thousand years ago. ““With all my heart I glorify the Lord!... In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.” ³

Advent marks the beginning of the Christian liturgical calendar. Waiting expectantly for Jesus is where we begin. And it is here, in these moments, that Mary reminds us of what it means to hope. Of what it looks like to take comfort in God’s faithfulness. Of how joyful it can feel to trust, even if those promises seem counter-intuitive. Mary’s enduring witness to us is to be bold and to take a risk. For even when it appears as if God’s promises do not have the slightest chance of succeeding, they do. Because the One who promises is faithful.

“Mary rejoices because God’s work is being done, and because she has become a participant in the working out of God’s will in and for the world.” ⁴ “In

² Willimon, 26.

³ Willimon, 26.

⁴ J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume A*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 41.

accepting this promise, Mary becomes the first to believe the good news of Jesus. She becomes the first disciple” and “the first prophet.”⁵

Considering this, we are both awed and more than a little intimidated. Privately, we have compared ourselves to Mary and we hardly stack up. She was faithful, while we have denied. She accepted the challenge, while we have slinked away. She carried the burden of God’s own Son, while we can hardly be bothered to go out of our way. It is surprising, isn’t it, that God knows all of this about each of us? Yet, God still chooses to entrust the message of the Gospel to us anyway. This, of course, says so much more about nature of hope and the gracious character of God, than it could ever say about us.

This is why you may have heard that “hope is not an act of will so much as it is an act of imagination and courage.”⁶ If this is true, then real, lasting transformation will not occur by mere force of will alone. Rather, the source of our hope is profoundly other - rooted not in what we are capable of doing, but in what God is capable of doing through us. And it is here, in the season of Advent, when we cultivate “the ability to ground oneself, not in the belief that humans will get it

⁵ Eric D. Barreto, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume A*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 42.

⁶ Valerie Bridgeman, “Obligated to Hope: An African-American Perspective,” *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2020, 23.

right, but that God will help us to live into God’s own vision for humanity and all creation.”⁷

Valerie Bridgeman teaches at the Methodist Theological School in Delaware, Ohio. She writes that “hope is a call to look up rather than away from the horrors of the world. We look up, not in a way to deny what is, but to imagine what could be, and to work for that with God’s help. Such hope begins with the understanding that while we might not know the day or hour of Christ’s inbreaking – this Advent or in some consummate future – we can be ‘awake.’”⁸

Yet, I know, and you know it too – that we aren’t always awake. And we don’t always hope. This is why a church member once approached his pastor and admitted, “There are times when I just cannot say the creed.” In response, the pastor was wise and kind. “I’ll say it for you until you can say it again,” the minister offered. For “whether or not you were aware of it, there have been times when you have said it for me; and I shall probably need you to do so again in the future. That is one thing we mean by ‘the communion of the saints.’ That is one reason we are given to one another in the church.”⁹

⁷ Bridgeman, 23.

⁸ Bridgeman, 23.

⁹ John B. Rogers, Jr., “Entering into Advent,” *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2020, 6.

“To live by faith may not mean less pain or distress; the way of faith is not a detour around adversity. Indeed, there are circumstances in which faith seems only to sustain us, to help us endure. Sometimes we can do no more than cling to the faith of others. Sometimes the faith of the church, locally and historically, has to bear us along in our doubt and disability.”¹⁰

Yet, the beauty of the church is that “when we cannot sing, when we cannot hope, this choir picks up the notes” and “teaches us to sing.”¹¹ In doing so, they are following the example of scripture, in which “a chorus of bold, faithful women” reside, “singing about God’s promises. Miriam sings as Israel is freed from Egypt. Hannah sings as she hands her long-hoped-for son into the arms of Eli. Anna sings in temple just a chapter from now in Luke. A young woman named Mary sings a prophet’s song.”¹² And as the notes rise and fall, Mary invites us to wonder if we, too, will dare to hope.

A number of years ago, “a group of Soviet Christian dissidents was asked by a television reporter, ‘Well, what do you want? Why aren’t Soviet Christians satisfied with the new freedoms Gorbachev has given? Why won’t you now soften

¹⁰ Rogers, 6.

¹¹ Barreto, 65.

¹² Barreto, 65.

your criticism and support the government?’ One of the Christian dissidents responded. The translator explained, ‘He says they are not satisfied. He says they want more.’”¹³

This year we do, indeed, pray for more. Not for more presents under the tree, but for more clarity, more purpose, more vision. We pray for the choir that leads us in song, and for the saints who lead the way. This year, we rejoice with Mary, who proclaims the mighty things that God has done, not merely for her but for “the lowly” and “the hungry.” And we enter into her longing for justice and, praying for the courage to answer God’s call whenever and wherever we are needed. May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.

¹³ Willimon, 27.