

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – December 20, 2020 – Son of Mary
Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26 and Luke 1:26-38

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

- 1 I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.
- 2 I declare that your steadfast love is established forever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.
- 3 You said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to my servant David:
- 4 ‘I will establish your descendants forever,
and build your throne for all generations.’”
- 19 Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said:
“I have set the crown on one who is mighty,
I have exalted one chosen from the people.
- 20 I have found my servant David;
with my holy oil I have anointed him;
- 21 my hand shall always remain with him;
my arm also shall strengthen him.
- 22 The enemy shall not outwit him,
the wicked shall not humble him.
- 23 I will crush his foes before him
and strike down those who hate him.
- 24 My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;
and in my name his horn shall be exalted.
- 25 I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.
- 26 He shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation!’”

Luke 1:26-38

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.

Last Sunday, from the depths of an expectant mother’s heart, we heard a resounding song of praise known as the *magnificat*. Mary, the mother of Jesus, steps forward as “the latest in a long line of God’s chosen witnesses” who “have done their part to prepare the way of the Lord. She is not the first woman to be enlisted in divine, prophetic service – Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth all preceded her. What sets Mary apart is the level of difficulty and disruption that is being demanded of her.”¹

The story is familiar. Mary is engaged but not yet married. And she is taken aback by the angelic claim that she will conceive a child from the Holy Spirit. That Mary is a person of faith does not negate the biological improbability of this divine promise. And in response, she asks the universal question of all who have been on the receiving end of unexpected news.

¹ Will Willimon, *Lectionary Sermon Resource, Year B, Part 1* (Abingdon Press, 2017), 30-31.

“How can this be?” A lot of people have been asking this question lately. “How can this be” is the common refrain of fatigued medical professionals faced with staffing shortages and dwindling ICU capacity in the midst of the latest surge. It is the disoriented cry of schoolteachers whose online lesson plans have been laid to waste by endless distractions that sever creativity and shatter every glimmer of sustained thought.

“How can this be” is the question of small and mid-size business owners whose once thriving ventures have given way to a dramatic loss of customers, rising debts, and difficult conversations with valued employees. “How can this be” is the grief-stricken plea of grandparents unexpectedly estranged from a newborn child, of parents who are juggling far too many responsibilities, and of children who sense that the world is not as safe as it once seemed. “How can this be” is the familiar lament of those whose present feels threatening and whose future appears uncertain.

Yet, even in her disbelief, Mary does not remain in that place forever – dwelling on the uncertainty. Soon, her earnest question transforms into a statement of confident trust. “Let it be with me,” affirms Mary, “just as you have said.” She is basically saying, “I have no idea what all of these changes in my life will mean, but

I am willing to serve God in the middle of this change.”² And here, on account of Mary’s witness, we learn that “profound faithfulness preceded Jesus’ birth.”³

Faithfulness, however, is not to be confused with stability. Mary and Joseph have a serious challenge. They are not yet married and struggling with the surprising news of an unexpected pregnancy. Theirs is family in crisis. They are living in a complicated reality, saturated with earthly expectations intertwined with the risk of divine promise. Soon, this family will be on the move, leaning into that promise, “venturing into places unknown” and “into a future that only God knows.”⁴ Soon, this child will be born.

Still, that when God appears, it is not as we might expect. God-made-flesh does not arrive “as a wise older person, full of inspiring platitudes or homely wisdom gleaned from years of experience.”⁵ No. Our God arrives as a helpless dependent. As a baby born to a young woman named Mary who has been chosen and gifted for the task of nurturing him.

² Willimon, 34.

³ Eric D. Barreto, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume A*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 64.

⁴ Willimon, 35.

⁵ Willimon, 33.

The text tells us that Mary is favored, but it never tells us why. Up to this point, her resume is relatively sparse. She had been raised in a modest home. Nothing is said of her academic credentials or capacity. There is no mention of her popularity. No discussion of her leadership potential. Yet, that she is ordinary makes her all the more relatable. Mary, we know, is one of us. And this alone is cause for celebration.

Just think of the “many voices that tell people they are not good enough. Children and teens are mocked for their appearance or sexual identity or choices in clothing. Adults constantly hear via advertising that they are not attractive enough, fit enough, thin enough, successful enough.”⁶ In Mary’s story, we find the needed corrective. In this long-awaited contrast, the ordinary ones “have been graced by God! They are affirmed. They are enough.”⁷

We find it odd that God’s blessing does not bring acceptability, prosperity, or comfort.⁸ But it never has. Instead, it brings disruption. Could anything be more disruptive than a baby? And here, in the story of Mary and Joseph, we discover that family life is much more complicated than we would like to admit. Far from safe

⁶ Lynn Japinga, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume A*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 67.

⁷ Japinga, 67.

⁸ R. Alan Culpepper, *Luke, The New Interpreter’s Bible in Twelve Volumes*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1995), 52-53.

and predictable, family is actually “one of the most unstable organizations of which we are a part. A family must constantly be on the move if it is to stay together. New life is constantly being brought into the family through birth and marriage. There is also loss in a family through death, separation, divorce, and conflict and alienation.”

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All of this means that “if you are really in love with stability, if you have got to have your life always stable,” then you may not be happy with the unpredictable rhythms of family life, and you will certainly feel conflicted “with the sort of savior we are receiving in our world at this time of year.”¹⁰ For Jesus came not to appease us but “to disorder our lives, to demand great things of us, to expect great deeds from us.”¹¹ Which is why so many of us can testify “to the ways in which following this God has made [our lives] less secure, less predictable, and less stable than ever.”¹²

I will leave you this morning with a personal story. Recently, there have been a number of occasions when I was feeling quite low. My mother and father-in-law celebrated 50 years of marriage, and their other children who live in Washington

⁹ Willimon, 35.

¹⁰ Willimon, 34.

¹¹ Willimon, 34.

¹² Willimon, 34.

State and Germany with their spouses were scheduled to come and join us this year for Christmas. As a result of Covid-19, that will no longer be happening.

In a year when so much has been upended, I confess that I am not so sure about welcoming a newborn baby named Jesus who will one day call me to follow “into God’s unknown and unpredictable future.”¹³ And I wonder, hasn’t this year already asked enough of us? For most of us, this Christmas will look and feel very different than any that we have previously experienced. Office and personal parties have been suspended. Travel has slowed. And worship will remain online.

This is not the Christmas that we envisioned. But this isn’t the savior that we envisioned either. And as we bow our heads and ask “how can this be,” we know God promises to stand with us in the midst of life’s disruptions and to hold us in the depths of our despair. This year, may we welcome God’s arrival with urgency. And with fresh vision, may we pray, come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

¹³ Willimon, 34.