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Luke 1: 26-38

Title: IT'S ALL ABOUT MARY

Prayer: Holy One, we've journeyed through Advent in our heads and hearts. We've checked off our to-do lists AND we've focused on how to grow and change so we're ready for the Christ to break into our lives. Now we are here, as ready as we can possibly be. Open our hearts so we may hear your message for us today. Amen.

Here we are folks, the fourth of Advent. Our last stop before everything changes and the Christ is born into the world ... again and for the first time.

How are we feeling? Ready? Exhausted? Confused? Alert? All of the above?

What exactly have the last three weeks of anticipating and repenting and taking stock meant to us, anyway? Are we changed at all?

We started this Advent journey together with Isaiah and Mark passages that were full of despair – people realizing they'd made a mess of things, and people being told to watch and be ready because it was not going to be pretty when Christ returned. We heard of darkening skies and stars falling and realized that maybe we weren't quite ready for the Holy to show up unannounced.

Then we talked of peace. We heard comforting words from Isaiah and we were reminded of John the Baptist's call from the wilderness that one was coming soon who would bring with him the Holy Spirit. We explored how easy it is to turn away and to avoid the suffering around us – how we're wired to move to the mountains instead of to move the mountains.

And, last week we reminded ourselves that God was going to get us in the end anyway so we might as well say yes. We remembered that God undergirds everything we do and everything we are, and we dared to contemplate that maybe just maybe we were ready for the Christ to arrive.

Karoline Lewis, a professor at Luther Seminary says "God coming to us will get in motion a course of life, a series of events over which we will have little control." She suggests that Advent establishes a faith way of life that we should not abandon once all the Christmas presents are open.

It's like that Sesame Street song from years ago: Keep Christmas with you, all through the year...

Today's incredible story of Mary being visited by Gabriel is couched between Elizabeth and Zechariah's story.

One of the reasons for this is to add weight and validity to Mary's story.

Zechariah was a priest and married to Elizabeth. Once when he was chosen to be in the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense the angel Gabriel appeared to him and said that he and Elizabeth would have a child and they would name him John. Zechariah was overwhelmed by this news because they had been trying for years and could not conceive; so Zechariah said "how can this be? We are old." Gabriel said "because you do not believe my words which will be fulfilled in time, you will be unable to speak until the day these things occur." And, right then Zechariah could no longer speak.

Now, hit the pause button on their story. Here is where the gospel writer inserts Mary's visitation from Gabriel, before finishing Elizabeth's story by telling us a pregnant Mary visited a pregnant Elizabeth. They were both excited, even their unborn babies were excited. Elizabeth offered words of blessing and praise for Mary, and Mary shared the Magnificat. Then Elizabeth gave birth and Zechariah could speak once more.

Putting these stories together reinforces for us that nothing is impossible for God. Just think about how the disciples didn't believe Mary when she said the stone had been rolled away and Jesus was gone. The writers realized the power of two stories was greater than one. If Elizabeth and Zechariah – two old and barren people can have a baby, surely this teenaged virgin can have a baby. Nothing is impossible for God. Nothing.

God asks Gabriel to go to Nazareth – this hill top village in the Galilean territory of Northern Israel – where he will find Mary and Joseph. The passage tells us that Joseph was a man from the house of David, and that Mary was a virgin – children probably the last thing on her mind since she wasn't yet living with Joseph.

Most of the dialogue in the story is Gabriel speaking. Mary only has two lines:

- *How can this be, since I am a virgin? And,*
- *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*

These two lines move us from denial (who me?) to discipleship (here I am, use me). In this one encounter Mary's life changes forever. She is perplexed, startled, probably frightened and confused. She's thinking 'how can this be?' But there's this Angel that has appeared from nowhere, so her choices seem pretty singular. Her only response in the midst of shock is ... well, okay, I guess. I don't understand what's happening but I don't really have a choice ... do I?

Gabriel goes on to offer Mary more detail – the power of the Holy Spirit will hover over you and a child will be born and will be the son of God. Oh, and guess what else – your cousin Elizabeth is pregnant too, six months in now. See? Nothing is impossible for God.

Maybe it was the explanation of how it would happen, maybe it was being comforted by hearing her cousin was going through the same thing, or maybe she just had a few minutes to catch her breath, but within the time of Gabriel's explanation, Mary's heart is opened to this new way of life and she responds not with fear or confusion but acceptance "Here am I, God's servant, let it be with me according to your word."

Commentators make a lot of comparisons with this story to other pieces of Christ's story. Some compare the old age and barrenness of Elizabeth to the youth and virginity of Mary. Some compare Jesus' spiritual conception and birth into human body to his human death into a spiritual body. Then there are countless comparisons to annunciation and call stories elsewhere in the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible.

The parallel I like is between words spoken by Mary and words spoken later by Jesus. Mary says in this passage "Let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) Now, jump your mind forward ... Jesus is in the garden, he knows the end is coming and he's not too keen on following through. He goes into the garden to pray while all his disciples fall asleep. He says "Not my will but yours be done." (Luke 22:42). Both mother and son say the same thing: your will be done, and they demonstrate how our lives are to be lived in service to God.

Eugene Peterson reminds us that Mary would have been teaching Jesus to pray when he was a baby and a young child. And maybe one of the repeated prayers she taught him was the one she uttered to Gabriel: Behold I am the handmaiden of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word. It obviously stuck with Jesus.

Our prayers are acts of submission that shape our lives of willing obedience to the kingdom of God, to God's path in this world, and to our role in helping to bring heaven on earth. Like what Karoline Lewis said ... Advent establishes a faith way of life that we don't abandon once all the presents are open.

We tend not to focus much on Mary in the Protestant tradition. We don't pray to her, we don't think of her as a saint. We don't really think about her much at all. And, maybe that's because there's nothing special about her. She's a teenaged girl, sort of old enough to be out of her family's grasp but still too young to be running her own household. I like to think of her as being in that small window of pure freedom when you've got your wits about you but you don't have any responsibility yet.

She's just a girl. She didn't do anything incredibly virtuous to merit bearing the son of God; nor did she do anything vicious that would render her punished with the societal shame of an unmarried pregnancy. She was just a teenager going about her business.

And she is an example of grace. God's grace. God chose Mary. Not because of anything she did or didn't do. God chose Mary. We'll never know why – that's not for us to know.

God chose Mary because God chose Mary. This is grace that we also live in. The unmerited love and care of the Holy in our lives.

Mary isn't blessed because she bore the son of God. Mary is blessed because of her devotion to the word of God. Because she said yes.

Remember? "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come."

Annie Dillard in her book "Teaching a Stone to Talk" (p. 40) has this to say about church:

It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to worship; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.

If Mary's story teaches us anything it's that establishing a faith way of life is dangerous and exhilarating – our lives will change forever. When the angel Gabriel appears in front of your face, you're definitely going to want to grab a life jacket and hang onto something. God can turn everything upside down and it's none of our business when or how God does this.

Just look at the story – not only was Mary's life changed forever, Elizabeth, Zechariah and Joseph's lives were as well. And, who God is for us is changed forever. We entered this story thinking that the Holy was this overarching, all powerful, distant and all knowing entity. We leave this story learning that God is also a vulnerable, helpless and dependent baby; and an energy that will break into our lives when we least expect it.

From week one Mark tells us to "Keep awake."

From week two John tells us "the one more powerful than I is coming after me."

From week three Paul tells us "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances."

And from today Mary tells us "Here I am, your will be done."

All through Advent we've been called to turn toward the Holy, to put our hearts in order, to be ready for Christ to come, and to say yes when the Spirit arrives.

Here we are, servants of the Lord, let it be with us according to God's word. We are ready!

Amen.