

Isaiah 61:1-4, 10-11 ~ Luke 1:46b-55
Those Who Dream: God Will Delight
 December 13, 2020 ~ Third Sunday of Advent
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Text:

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” That is how our story today begins. In the spirit of our pink candle, our Gaudete Sunday of Joy, whether you are feeling it or not: Seat yourself around the fire, settle your mind. Get ready to hear a piece of our story that meets this description by poet Gladys Cardiff, member of the Eastern band of Cherokee, where she writes:

*There are words so old
 they must be honored when you come to them,
 and only then
 can they do their work.ⁱ*

I will do my best to honor today’s ancient words, by laying the fire from which they blaze: the perplexing visit of the Angel Gabriel to a certain town in Galilee called Nazareth. To a specific young girl named Mary, to announce that She had been chosen to become the mother of Jesus, the Son of the Most High. After a few pertinent questions (I would have asked many more), Mary gave her “yes” saying: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38) She then zoomed over to the house of her older relative and confidante, Elizabeth with her startling news. Elizabeth, who was further along in her pregnancy with John the Baptist, even before he was born playing the role of the prophet responded with a leap of joy, the first flutter that caused Elizabeth to shout out with a loud voice: “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” (Luke 1:45)

Our gospel text today is what came next. Certainly not what you would expect from a young girl who just said “yes” to the most scandalous and extraordinary pregnancy ever. Even in her, “Here am I- yes, I’m all in” response Mary was also saying, “no.” “No” to convention, “no” control and certainty. “No” to the status quo. May these ancient words attributed to Mary, do their work on each of us this day as I read Luke 1: 46b-55.

Sermon:

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” A little boy named Chris once asked his mom. She told him she still wasn’t exactly sure, (being one of those very wise moms) and then asked him the same question, “What do *you* want to be, when you grow up?” To which Chris replied, “You have to have the right stuff... you know, the coat, the boots, the hat, the hoses... If I had the right stuff, I could be anything... I could even be a girl!”

Don’t we all wish we had “the right stuff?” I remember so clearly when I was about 12 or 13, how I absolutely had to have a certain black leather belt. Not too thick, not too thin, the leather had to be not too shiny, not too dull. And I haven’t even started to tell you about what the buckle had to look like. My poor mom, hard as she tried--could not figure out what I wanted *so desperately* in order to be cool. I somehow (mistakenly) thought this belt would be my ticket into the land of the popular. If *only* I had “the right stuff.”

You may recall the 1983 movie, *The Right Stuff*, based on Tom Wolfe's book by that title, that tells the true and riveting story of the original Mercury 7 astronauts, and the first 15 years of America's space program. In 2020, Disney made a new series based on the same book. I remember being intrigued and amused by the selection process NASA used to identify these astronauts. They devised a series of tests to determine who had "the right stuff" to be the first humans to blaze a path into outer space. What *did* they really need? As rigorous and scientific as these tests were, they were only guessing at what it took to make the best astronauts. What does it take to be the best "star travelers"?

Chuck Yeager, who died this past week at the age of 97, was a key part of this story. He was the first person to break the sound barrier. Although he disclaimed the notion that he had "the right stuff" he definitely had what it took to be a flying ace for the Airforce, flying 64 combat missions in World War II, and returning to fly 127 missions during the Vietnam War at age 43. Chuck Yeager pushed back against "the right stuff" concept with the idea that it was practice and hard work that fueled success.ⁱⁱ He knew that it isn't about having the right belt, or boots or the gear and gadgets. Although they may help, this story about Mary teaches us about what it really takes.

Mary, who was chosen by God to be the God-bearer, in Greek the "*theotokos*" obviously had "the right stuff" to be the mother of Jesus. One could argue the most important mission of all time, kind of a space mission in reverse: God landing on earth in the form of a baby boy. No one really knows *why* God chose very young and unmarried Mary of Nazareth. Whether Gabriel went to other women first who refused the lunacy of this mission, we will never know. But we do know that God chose Mary, and that she said "yes." Whatever else she had inside of her, she had the "right stuff" to bear the utter joy and the deep pain and anguish of being Jesus' mom.

How do we become God-bearers, *theotokos*, like Mary? How can God breakthrough the sound barrier of our resistance? As individuals, as a church, as the world that Jesus came to save? The five reversals in Mary's Magnificat (as this text has been named) tell us something about Mary and something about God. Her proclamation, her prophecy in these ancient words indicate that somehow Mary knew what starship enterprise she was boarding. Souls that magnify the Lord, Souls that rejoice in the leap of faith that puts God's dream front and center, are souls that say "yes" and say "no." Souls that say "yes" to God's mercy and justice; are also called say "no" to all that is against God's compassion, justice and peace.

Mary's Magnificat magnifies this truth: God is not about the status quo. Never has been, never will, until God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. Mary's words echo her ancient ancestor Hannah's at the weaning of her son Samuel. Yes, God has been about this mission for a very long time. Did you ever notice that? Throughout our biblical story, from Genesis to Revelation: when God moves into the life of the world, everything changes. Old ordering is displaced, new reordering begins.

The Isaiah text, our first lesson, was the very text Jesus chose to articulate is mission on earth. Jesus obviously had the right stuff in spades. But even from Jesus' lips, his first sermon on this text and his talk of reversal, of disruption to the status quo, did not end well for Jesus either. Read Luke 4:16 for details, but he barely escaped with his life. We don't like to upset the status quo, *especially* if we were born into a place of comfort and power in this world. We might prefer to ignore the "no" part of Jesus' call. We might rather limit Jesus' message to individual salvation alone. But when we do, we compromise the fullness of God's mission in sending Jesus to this earth. When we do, we also will miss the joy that can only be found through the disruption, the change, the reordering which is God at work through the ages up to today. God at work in the people of Judah after their return from Exile; God at work in the birthing of Jesus; God at work in the repair and restoration of our broken hearts and nation and world.

Yes, the baby Jesus came to disrupt the status quo in the name of mercy and justice. Somehow Mary knew this. The rich mix of God's "yes" to Love and compassion for all people and "no" to any form of supremacy or oppression, calls us today beyond sound bite dismissals of those with whom we disagree. This rich mix can bring repair and restoration out of the ashes of despair, even despair over the generations. As Isaiah metaphorically tells it: the earth brings forth its shoots from the deep, dark, rich soil. Sometimes it takes shared pain to knock us off our high horse, sometimes onto our rear ends, in order for us to see the world from a different angle than we did atop our prize stallion of privilege. God's truth in this painful disordering is healing for everyone involved: both the powerful and the lowly; the hungry and the rich.

I have a true story to illustrate how this kind of divine disruption of the status quo has worked this year in Charlotte, North Carolina. The crisis, the darkness and pain of the COVID-19 pandemic actually opened the way for healing a post-civil War long and deep wound between two churches in Charlotte, North Carolina. Sherry Blackman, tells it like this,

"First United Presbyterian Church, a Black congregation established in 1866 is located literally a stone's throw away from tall-steepled First Presbyterian Church, established in 1821. Prior to the Civil war, slaves worshiped alongside their white masters at First Presbyterian Church, but as tensions rose, Blacks were no longer free to sit in the pews. They were relegated to the balcony, and later the "freed" were confined to the basement of the church. That was when the newly emancipated believed they had no choice but to leave First Presbyterian and build their own house of worship. The deep pain was a moral divide that many wanted to move past, but too painful to address head on. Then in September 2016, when 43-year-old Keith Lamont Scott was killed by a Charlotte police officer, and another civilian was murdered at one of the protests, the wound of racism was reopened and bled anew."

"The killings triggered a more honest grappling with race, to where the session of the white church composed a letter seeking forgiveness. This was a beginning, and plans to worship together twice a year began forming. But then when the pandemic hit the two sessions committed to leading worship every Sunday together—and have been since March. Worshipping together has moved hearts. The witness of the pastors preaching together weekly, spurred on by a health crisis has brought the much-needed healing of two congregations."ⁱⁱⁱ

“We are all meant to give birth to God,” So wrote Meister Eckhart, medieval mystic (1260-1327). Of course, there was only one Mary the literal mother of Jesus. But we can all take a page from her joy-infused Magnificat. From where did that gush of joy spring forth? We can only guess. But I think that maybe Mary’s story teaches us this about divine joy: Joy happens when we say “yes” we don’t have our stuff together, and we never will, but God does. Joy happens when we claim God as Savior and *not* technology, nor social progress, nor a political system or any one particular political leader or party. Joy happens when we jump on God’s train bound for glory. This train that won’t leave the station until everyone is on board.

Elizabeth’s words ring loud and clear this day: “And blessed is she who believed.” And blessed are you when you hear and believe that you are so loved by God, so that you can rejoice that God our Savior calls *you*, calls *us* to be God-bearers. Yes, we are all called to be magnifiers of God’s mercy and justice: as disruptive as that will be to the status quo within and all around us. And yes, God will delight.

We have all been given “The Right Stuff” to be God bearers, to be “*Theotokos*” like Mary. We are all pregnant with the possibility of new life, becoming more than we are, for God is with us and God is in us. Mary sings because she has new life in her. Are we ready to join in singing with her?^{iv}

ⁱ Gladys Cardiff, *A Bare Unpainted Table: Poems*, from “It has Something to Do with Final Words,” (New Issues Press: Kalamazoo, MI, 1999), p.31.

ⁱⁱ Jeffrey Kluger, Dec. 9, 2020, Time Magazine, <https://time.com/5919303/yeager-obit-right-stuff>

ⁱⁱⁱ Sherry Blackman, Dec. 11, 2020, presbyterianmissions.org

^{iv} Trisha Lyons Senterfitt, *Feasting on the Word, Advent Companion*, ed. David L. Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor, and Kimberly Bracken Long, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2014), p.90.