

**December 22, 2024**  
**“Promise and Possibility”**  
**Luke 1:39-55**  
**Pastor Tim**

I mean to be relatively short this morning, and hopefully sweet – if for no other reason than to give us more time to sing some Christmas carols at the end of the service.

Even though it's still Advent!

Two words—or actually, one phrase and one word—stand out for me from our reading this morning, from the gospel of Luke. From this exchange between Elizabeth, the expectant mother of John the Baptizer, and Mary, the expectant mother of Jesus.

So first the WORD, from the last verse of our second lesson, verse 55: promise, as in “God has come to the aid of God's child Israel, in remembrance of God's mercy, according to the PROMISE God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to God's descendants forever.”

And the promise is the covenant made between God and God's people – progressively described in the book of Genesis, initially through Abram (eventually called Abraham – we'll get to that in a minute): “I will bless you ... so that you will be a blessing.”

“Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.” And this spoken to Abram when he and Sarai (eventually called Sarah) were childless.

And at the ripe old age of 99, God further spells out the covenant: “You shall be the ancestor to a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor to a multitude of nations.” And so it goes.

And that covenant an extension of the one made AFTER the Great Flood, between God and Noah, and Noah's descendants, and—this from Genesis, chapter 9: “and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.

"I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood to destroy the earth."

And the sign of that covenant between God and God's creation: the rainbow. A rainbow after it rains, to remind both God and God's people about the everlasting covenant. A covenant of mutual accountability, a covenant renewed and further articulated through Moses as one founded above all else on love of God and neighbor in the form of hospitality and justice, in the form of compassion and care for the most vulnerable.

A covenant further renewed down through the ages, including through Jesus—the One to whom Mary is soon to give birth. Which brings us back to our reading.

That is the promise Mary names in her Magnificat, her song of praise to the God of mercy, the God of her ancestors. The One who brings down the powerful from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly. The One who fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty. The One who desires love and justice, enough for all to be fruitful and bear life forward, from generation to generation.

That is the promise.

Now to the PHRASE that stands out, from the last verse of our first lesson – verse 45: "...blessed is she who believed ..." As in, "blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the HOLY ONE."

So says Elizabeth, then pregnant with John, who will go on to prepare the way for Jesus. The child still in her womb leaps for joy at the sound of Mary's greeting.

And what was spoken to Mary comes just before this morning's text, from the mouth of the angel Gabriel: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus."

Mary is presented in the text as a virgin, and so reacts—at least initially—as any sensible person would to what has been spoken to her. She is rightly skeptical; she does not, in fact, believe.

“How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Good question, one that has been wrestled with for centuries. What Gabriel has spoken to Mary boggles the mind, stretches the imagination way, WAY, beyond possibility. But that’s what God does, right? Amen!

Gabriel tells her about Elizabeth, previously barren, unable like Sarah and so many others before her to bear children, now pregnant. “For nothing will be impossible with God.” Nothing will be impossible.

With that, Mary shakes off her doubt and leaps into full-on faith: “Here am I, the servant of the HOLY ONE; let it be with me according to your word.”

Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the HOLY ONE. Blessed is she who believed that SHE would be the fulfillment; that SHE would be the one to help make the impossible possible. To help make a way out of no way.

First promise, and then possibility. The promise is made by God with God’s people, but the promise is necessarily mutual, a covenant – and so it’s also made by God’s people with God.

And that promise is fulfilled when God’s people, when you and I, believe in possibility even—and especially—when doing so boggles the mind and stretches the imagination.

As Maya Angelou said, “We all have that possibility, that potential and that promise of seeing beyond the seeming.”

Mary’s holy YES to possibilities beyond the seeming, beyond her own ability to see is a fulfillment of the covenant, her pinky promise with God. Yes to love in the face of fear and hatred. Yes to justice in the face of oppression and poverty.

Her YES is an act of resilience, defiance, resistance – an act of joyful rebellion against the world as it is!

“My soul magnifies the HOLY ONE, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.”

Mary's magnificent and joyful YES opens the way, literally nurtures in her womb and eventually gives birth to possibility. Laboring to make what at first seemed impossible possible. A world as it can yet be. A world made new.

Lucille Clifton put it like this in poetic form:

*winged women was saying  
"full of grace" and like.  
was light beyond sun and words  
of a name and a blessing.  
winged women to only i.  
i joined them, whispering  
yes.*

Mary's response is the call the covenant places upon each of us, all of us, as God's people. To say yes, and keep saying yes, to love and justice in a bruised and broken world where love so often feels naïve, and justice so often feels out of reach. To say yes to another way, the very kindom of God, which Jesus reminds us again and again begins in each of us. Can only begin in each of us. If not in you, in me, who?

Blessed is she who believed, who believed in POSSIBILITY according to the PROMISE.

Blessed are YOU who believe, who believe in possibility according to the promise. Who believe, against all unbelief, in LIFE-GIVING possibility beyond the harsh limits of DEATH-DEALING reality. In a world yet becoming.

"Blessed are you," writes Jan Richardson, "who bear the light in unbearable times,"

*who testify  
to its endurance  
amid the unendurable,  
who bear witness  
to its persistence  
when everything seems  
in shadow  
and grief.*

*Blessed are you  
in whom  
the light lives,  
in whom*

*the brightness blazes—  
your heart  
a chapel,  
an altar where  
in the deepest night  
can be seen  
the fire that  
shines forth in you  
in unaccountable faith,  
in stubborn hope,  
in love that illumines  
every broken thing  
it finds.*

In faith, in hope, in love—with joy—that illumines every broken thing it finds. Promise and possibility.

I want to close with the Community Prayer we prayed earlier—from Ted Loder, who some of you know was the longtime and prophetic-in-his-own-right pastor at our sister congregation, First United Methodist Church of Germantown (FUMCOG).

Hear it again, through the lens of Advent promise and Christmas possibility:

*Wondrous Worker of Wonders, we praise you, not alone for what has been or for what is, but for what is yet to be, for you are gracious beyond all telling of it.*

*We praise you, that out of the turbulence of our lives a kingdom is coming, is being shaped even now out of our slivers of loving, our bits of trusting, our sprigs of hoping, our tootles of laughing, our drips of crying, our smidgens of worshipping; that out of our songs and struggles, out of our griefs and triumphs, we are gathered up and saved, for you are gracious beyond all telling of it.*

*We praise you that you turn us loose to go with you to the edge of now and maybe, to welcome the new, to see our possibilities, to accept our limits, and yet begin living to the limit of passion and compassion until, released by joy, we uncurl to other people and to your kingdom coming, for you are gracious beyond all telling of it. Amen.*

May it be so.