

The Women of Matthew's Genealogy: Mary

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 1:39-56

This morning we continue our sermon series on the women of Matthew's genealogy with the story of Mary from Matthew 1:16: "Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah."

In the last few weeks we've looked at Jesus' very human family line. We've heard about Tamar, Rahab and Ruth. The next woman Matthew mentions in Jesus' family tree is Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. If you were with us this fall you know we heard Bathsheba's difficult story not so long ago in our series on the life of David. And my very human self was thankful when Peter said today's message could be on Bathsheba or Mary today for this series. Maybe you who were with us for those difficult stories will be thankful with me. That's not to say Mary's story is roses. Not at all. But this morning I want to look at Mary's story in Luke 1 for hints of a Spirit-grown virtue: the virtue of alacrity. Alacrity in our spiritual lives is a quickness, eager willingness, enthusiasm to cooperate with God. Its opposite is apathy, inaction, disinterest, indifference.

This week as I was thinking about Mary, in what might be one of the greatest non-sequiturs ever, I thought of the Red Green show. Some of you know Red Green. 15 years in the running, Red Green was a Canadian handyman comedy show full of self-deprecating humor about life in middle age and beyond. Sometime during that show's run the group of outdoorsmen began to open their club meetings at Possum Lodge with a prayer. Red would call the meeting to order and say, "Let's bow our heads for the Man's Prayer." The men remove their hats and bow their heads and say together, "I'm a man. But I can change. If I have to. I guess." That's apathy.

Possum Lodge's ambivalent motto is funny and disarming and pointed because it calls out something true not just about men, though if Red's gender stereotype plays for you, I won't tell you to disregard it. But Red highlights something that can be a tendency for any of us. For those who are too comfortable with things as they are; for those who are reluctant to adjust their plans and purposes when the plans and purposes of God interrupt; for those who might forgo seeing or participating in the kingdom-bringing work of God, it's worth wondering.

Where are we today on this fourth Sunday of Advent as we wait for the return of our Savior? Apathy? Or alacrity? Somewhere in the middle range of acceptance? With that opening continuum in our minds, let's listen to Luke 1:39-56. This comes just after Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she will bear God's Son. We'll watch as Mary moves from obedient acceptance: "May it be to me as you have said" to joyful alacrity: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."

I think the hurry of this season is why I was so gripped this week by the little phrase in the opening of this passage that "Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea." In the middle of all our holiday scurrying, Mary, too, is in a place of hurrying and waiting as she begins to unpack what God has in store for her. But Mary's "hurry" gives us pause. What is she hurrying for? This trip to visit Elizabeth won't be easy for her. Getting to the hill country of Judah on foot is a trek: Elizabeth most likely lived in Hebron, a city of priests, 25 miles south of Jerusalem and nearly 100 miles from Mary's hometown in Nazareth. Maybe a five-day walk for Mary, that is, if morning sickness didn't slow her down much. Some commentators cite Mary's hurry to visit Elizabeth as an aspect of her obedience. To go back to the beginning of the sermon, maybe it's evidence of her alacrity?

Just before the passage we read this morning is the annunciation, when Gabriel visits Mary and "announces" that she is favored and will bear God's son. Gabriel expands on this startling news with a confirming sign: Elizabeth, Mary's relative, is also expecting a child in her silver years. And Mary's responds to Gabriel: "I am the Lord's servant; may it be to me as you have said." She's obedient and accepting. She

communicates her willingness to cooperate with God's plan. But despite that acceptance, I don't think her hurry to visit Elizabeth here is prompted primarily by joyful alacrity, obedient devotion to God. Notable as her obedience is, I think Mary's haste to get on the road points to something else the Spirit is stirring in her soul.

Let me ask this: If an angel came to you with a word from God that impacted your future and certified that promise with a sign in the life of a relative far away, what would you be likely to do? Sit in splendid isolation at home and ponder? Or, like Mary, would you "hurry"? Would you move heaven and earth to go talk with this faithful and wise person, someone just as surprised as you, someone who might help fill in your horizon about what God is up to?

Mary knows things are about to get a whole lot harder for her, a young unmarried expecting woman in the town where she grew up. She anticipates the looks and the gossip that are coming as her baby grows. Possibly she even worries about being put to death for becoming pregnant outside of marriage. Mary's life as she knows it, and her hopes for a "normal" settled marriage and motherhood seem to be over. What she imagined for herself has been turned upside down. When Gabriel's announcement lands, Mary doesn't object or share any concerns. She holds whatever thoughts flash across her mind and heart. But you wonder what she did with that, who she talked to. Did she go to her parents? To Joseph?

We don't know from the Bible. We do know she high tails it to see Elizabeth. Elizabeth, who is literally a hundred miles away. Elizabeth is perhaps the best person for Mary to talk this over with. So Mary hurries. She hurries because if the angel has really come, if what has been told to her is about to happen, she's going to need some support. But at the same time, if God is doing what he seems to be doing, an entirely new thing is beginning. This is true not just for Mary but for the whole world too.

So with sore feet, an aching body, and a willing heart Mary knocks on Elizabeth's door. As her "hello" reaches Elizabeth's ears, the Spirit of God puts an exclamation point on Gabriel's message. John the Baptist, all three pounds of him alive with the Holy Spirit, jumps for joy in utero. Before Mary can spill her story or ask her questions, Elizabeth's abdomen heaves, the air electrified with the presence of God. And the Spirit sings through Elizabeth of the new work that God is up to: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear. And who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For as soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" (Luke 1:42-45) Mary collapses in joyful astonishment and relief. Elizabeth knows her news already?! Elizabeth's baby is leaping?! And she is blessed, not cursed, in her unwed pregnant state because she is the mother of Elizabeth's Lord!?

This has all the surprising marks of God's work. Elizabeth knows of Mary's pregnancy not through phone call or baby shower invitation, but through the Spirit's revelation in a time when the news came only with the travelers who carried it. It's all real. Mary hasn't dreamt up Gabriel's visit; she is going to have a son named Jesus. And as she steps into a future she cannot imagine or control, she's going to be ok. Because God is in it. The visit with Elizabeth blesses Mary and sets her free for, you guessed it, alacrity. The embrace of not just willing but joyful obedience. Not only have her words agreed with God's plan and her feet walked to see his confirming sign for herself; now in the company of Elizabeth she is given the gift of eager anticipation, a readiness to respond with enthusiasm and praise to God's good call on her life.

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name." Mary's exuberant song is called the Magnificat; you can hear the word "magnify" in it. She enlarges, makes great, the name of her God, who, despite appearances, rules a kingdom where the last in the world's eyes are first and the first are last. A God who judges neither poor nor rich by their status, all are welcome as they come with the same need for a merciful savior. So the young poor girl from a backwater town sings with everything she is, body, soul, and spirit. She sings about the power and goodness of God. She sings about what God has done and what he has promised as if they are one and the same thing, a completed work, because of course, God has shown her that they are. "Blessed—indeed—is she who has believed that the Lord's word to her will be fulfilled."

Did you notice that Mary doesn't move from acceptance of God's assignment for her to alacrity on her own? Tim Keller points this out: that though Mary responds willingly to Gabriel's announcement, her response is a little uncomprehending. But her response to the very same call is much more robust after seeing the work of God and hearing the blessing of God through Elizabeth. Through Elizabeth, God moves Mary's soul. Isolation and fear become less powerful. Eager expectation comes into the room of her soul too. Shared pregnancies, shared anxieties, and shared joy in the promises of God make way for hope.

When you are at a crossroads in life, anticipating a next step with the Spirit into a future you can't imagine or control, who do you hurry off to see? Who helps lighten your load and illuminate your soul with faith, hope, and love? My prayer for our church is that each of us has a couple of "Elizabeths" in our lives; and that we are "Elizabeths" for a couple of people. These people strengthen us in honest, realistic, perspective-enlarging hope in the face of challenge. They help us remember that 2000 years after Mary's song the promise has still come true, people from every generation are indeed still calling her blessed; and people from every generation are indeed still looking forward to Christ's second Advent in hope.

Hope in our time of history seems to be in short supply. The optimism and hope in human goodness that was part of American life even when I was growing up is far in the rearview mirror. But Christian hope is a resilient thing. It's a thing that realizes that at bottom, even when the world seems upside down, God's promises are as good as done, and they aren't going anywhere.

Forty years ago pastor and author Eugene Peterson wrote a book called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. In it he writes this about hope in this time between the first and second coming of Jesus: "Hoping does not mean doing nothing. It is not fatalistic resignation. It means going about our assigned tasks, confident that God will provide the meaning and the conclusions. It is not compelled to work away at keeping up appearances with a bogus spirituality. It is the opposite of desperate and panicky manipulations, of scurrying and worrying. And hoping is not dreaming.... It means a confident, alert expectation that God will do what he said he will do. It is imagination put in the harness of faith. It is a willingness to let God do it his way and in his time."

"Hope is imagination put in the harness of faith." Hope is knowing that although like Mary we are small in this world, we are loved by a great and good God. We are carried along by the promises of God, swept up in the current of his purposes over the long haul of his good work. Hope is a settledness, come what may, that just as surely as Jesus was born 2000 years ago, so surely he will return to cleanse and renovate this world he loves. This good-as-done promise grounds our active hope in the waiting. It inspires our obedient acceptance and even our moments of joyful alacrity as we glimpse him at work.

Blessed, indeed, are we who believe what others have seen. Blessed are we, ingrafted into the continuing family tree of the baby in Bethlehem, who walk in the sure hope of his return. Amen.

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