

Advent 4B 2023 Luke 1:26-38, 46-55

I saw a cartoon this week where Mary was giving Joseph the silent treatment while Joseph was begging Mary to forgive him for forgetting to make reservations at the inn like she had told him to. I am pretty confident saying that conversation is neither biblically nor historically accurate, but I do appreciate that the scenario humanizes Mary and Joseph, which is an aspect of their lives that we've largely lost along the way. Considering that the whole point of the Christmas story is the incarnation, God becoming truly human, Mary, Joseph, and even the baby Jesus have often been portrayed as if they behaved entirely unlike any other family or any other humans. That may be partly because we hear so little of their interactions—not the conversation that would have taken place between Mary and Joseph when Mary became pregnant; certainly no argument over the lack of accommodations in Bethlehem or complaint about the 100 mile trip from Nazareth on the eve of Mary's due date. In fact, we never hear Joseph speak in any gospel at all. And aside from Mary scolding adolescent Jesus for staying behind in the temple without telling anyone, Mary's only other words are what we read and sang from Luke's gospel this morning, and even then, Mary's song is just a paraphrase of the first book of Samuel. So without the holy family saying much for themselves, it's easy to imagine them like the silent statues in our nativity scenes and to fill in the blanks with some very unlikely descriptions: *The cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes, But little Lord Jesus no crying he makes...* I mean, really? He was sleeping in a feed trough and don't most babies cry? Or *Mary Mother, Meek and Mild...* which frankly, she was not.

When the angel Gabriel appears and announces to Mary that because she has found favor with the Lord, she will be rewarded with an unplanned, out of wedlock pregnancy, she has some questions. Even though Gabriel presents this as good news, it is not logical news. I'm not certain that his explanation cleared up a lot for her, but her inquiry is one of the ways we know that we are dealing with real people here. Wouldn't any of us have been "much perplexed" in her position? One school of thought says that any questions or doubts are a sign of weak faith; I've always been of the opposite opinion, that if we don't have some questions about where God is in the midst of this messy world, then we aren't

paying very close attention. If Mary, the Mother of God, can ask *How can this be?* then perhaps we can give ourselves permission to ask the hard questions of our faith.

Mary is not convinced by Gabriel's promises that Jesus will be great, that he will be given David's throne, or that he will reign forever over an unending kingdom. She doesn't jump at the chance to be part of that story. But when Gabriel tells her that her elderly cousin Elizabeth is also pregnant, Mary sees that God is up to something different. So Mary visits Elizabeth and with her sings what we traditionally call the *Magnificat*, the song that begins *My soul magnifies the Lord*, or in the version we sang for the psalmody today, *My soul proclaims your greatness, Lord...* And that song is anything but meek or mild. We might envision Mary silently pondering miraculous events in her heart, but when she does speak, she announces the birth of Jesus as a world-shattering event, singing that the Lord *scatters the proud in their conceit, casts down the mighty from their thrones, lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty*. Mary's song protests the world as we know it and promises that, through the birth of Jesus, God is bringing about a whole new way a life.

The coffee shop where the pastors meet every week has been playing Christmas music for at least a month. There's two songs you never want them to play when we're around: the first is Last Christmas by WHAM, because we all play Whamageddon—which is a whole other thing I'd be happy to explain later. But the other off-limits song is *Mary Did You Know?*...because we'll all obnoxiously argue with the radio, *Yes! Yes, Mary knew! Gabriel told her, and then she sang a whole song about it!* Mary wasn't unaware, she wasn't uninformed, she wasn't silent, and she wasn't meek. Mary listened, she pondered what Gabriel's words meant for her, she asked questions, she understood the assignment, and she boldly agreed: *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word*. Tonight we'll celebrate the gift of God coming to us in the birth of Jesus. But it was through Mary's courageous strength and willing service that God gave us that gift. So when we hear the call to gift others with God's love, may we answer with Mary's brave tenacity: *Here I am!*