



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT, YEAR B, DECEMBER 20, 2020
2 SAMUEL 7:1-11,16; PSALM 89:1-4, 19-26; ROMANS 16:25-27; LUKE 1:26-38

THE IMPROVISATIONAL TUNE OF MARY'S STORY



With the prospect of Christmas taking a different shape this year, I've noticed that Kathy and I are sharing Christmas memories of years gone by, perhaps more than ever. Maybe you are, too.

We had a laugh this past week as we recalled our daughters producing their own Christmas pageant for their parents in the living room when they were grade schoolers. Jane, who was older, usually served as lead

character and director of the play, but her little sister Jill would not always accede to Jane's direction.

As our memory holds it all these years later, Jill staged a protest, in the midst of their production one evening, crossing her arms mid-scene and declared her obstinate refusal to continue her rehearsed assignment: "I don't want to be Joseph!"

The negotiations played out before us, a pageant within the pageant, before arriving at an armistice: Joseph was cut from the pageant altogether. Jill would be Mary while big sister held arms over her as the angel Gabriel. Christmas peace came to our home that evening...

I love Christmas pageants; I have since I took my place in the annual pageant at the Cathedral School in Little Rock as a child. Christmas pageants are an ancient way of sharing the stories that matter most. They are more than entertainment, more than a stage play even. They are liturgical; they gather us up into their processions so we can move along with the characters we know from scripture. Pageants help us lay down the memories not for nostalgic purposes only, but to serve as embodied ways of remembering, of knowing that the sacred story resides deeply within us. Emmanuel.

Pageants aid us in connecting to God's story playing out in our lives here and now.

If it were just nostalgia, we risk using our spiritual ancestors like Mary in problematic ways, forcing their narrative into service for our pleasure. There's something more at play here. Pageantry serves a deeper purpose that children intuit naturally. They know it as serious work, even as it is fun for all.

And here on this final Sunday of



Advent, as we make our turn toward Christmas in earnest, there's a lot to unpack in this key scene of incarnational pageantry, when a frightful angel announces to Mary the news of her pregnancy and its deeper purpose. We know the rest of the story, embellished as it is, but it is important not to gloss too much on this particular scene, lest we risk shellacking the entire story with a veneer of nostalgic sweetness, making it more difficult to plumb the deeper truths being offer to us.

Taken at face value, this scene of the Annunciation to Mary by Gabriel will stop us short. Did Mary have a choice? Was she able to provide consent at her young age? We

might even ask is this a #MeToo moment depicting patriarchal abuses considered acceptable by those who recorded the story as we receive it? Is the God they present here made in their own image? What does sexual purity have to do with Mary's faithfulness?ⁱⁱ All important questions to wrestle with, but scripture invites a layered reading—so we might see what else may be gleaned.

Using an interpretive lens, the prism of Mary's story might prompt us to reflect on some familiar haunts: the shame of teen pregnancy, a forced migration along dangerous roads, a birth without one's mother present, regressive taxation by the empire, colonial oppression of the most vulnerable...now the story is becoming more real, more embodied.

But then notice Mary's response—she says YES. The story's holy premise falls apart if she does not have full agency to say NO. It's no accident that the songs we sing this morning are versions of Mary's song, the Magnificat, in which she speaks of praising God, and of God's tender mercy, and of God's upending the unjust ways of the world, and of a fervent hope for the world. Mary gives voice to all that! She claims her voice in the YES to God, and catches the vision that God has for her, and through her, for the world. It is really quite remarkable in its courageous witness.

But there's more...Rarely are such pivotal stories in scripture untethered to other stories laid down for us to connect to deeper roots of wisdom designed to make our spirits leap. Mary's song resonates with Hannah's song centuries earlier, when she conceives against all odds, and conjures in her heart a song of similar courage and witness. It's a lovely song worth looking up and dancing to. And Hannah's song hearkens back to Miriam's song in the Exodus from Egypt, tambourine in hand, spinning in delight with feet still caked with Red Sea mud.

Each woman improvises on the theme of God's deliverance and mercy and hope. It is their voices, not those of the biblical men, who afford us the indelible memories of their courage and faithfulness in the face of so much uncertainty and hardship.

These are the women who sing the notes that are handed to us in this moment, as God looks to us to take our roles in the pageantry of incarnate mercy and hope. The tune is different this year, to be sure, but perhaps we can hear a bit of angelic invitation to improvise in our own right. We need not invent a new tune; we have all the chords we need. The angel has whispered them once more to Mary just now, this time in our hearing.

It's been said that the best jazz improvisation is always on the verge of falling apart.ⁱⁱⁱ Mary's story makes more sense in that light. Our pageants do too.

So what say you: are you ready to play your part? The world needs this embodied story of mercy and hope now more than ever. And like Gabriel said, nothing will be impossible with God.

Luke 1:26-38 *[In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "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. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.]*

ⁱAnnunciation, by Alexander Ivanov, 1824. [5 Inspiring Quotes for the Feast of the Annunciation | Sr. Theresa Aletheia Noble \(patheos.com\)](#)

ⁱⁱA variety of feminist theologians have taken different approaches on interpreting this text and the conclusions they draw, from Mary Daly's dismissal of the text as irretrievably bankrupt, to others inclined to find salvage in the mix—e.g.,

Renita Weems, Rosemary Ruether, et al. I believe all of them offer food for thought by the discerning reader.

ⁱⁱⁱPianist Frank Barrett, as cited in an essay by Lauren Winner, whose theme of improvisation is adapted here as well.

[Lectionary column for December 20, Fourth Sunday of Advent \(christiancentury.org\)](#)