



***The Questions of Christmas:***  
**“DID YOU CATCH THAT ANNOUNCEMENT?”**

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Scripture: Luke 1:46-55

*And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

*“His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”*

Happy Gaudete Sunday! I suspect that is a word you have never heard before. But “Gaudete” is the name for the third Sunday in Advent. Gaudete is the ancient Latin word for “Rejoice!” and it was the first word in the Latin Mass for Advent 3: Rejoice! It is taken from Philippians 4:4-5: “Gaudete in Domino semper.” “Rejoice in the Lord always.” I’ve never been able to find names for the other three Sundays in Advent, but this Sunday is Gaudete: this is the Sunday of Joy. This is the Sunday to remove the confessions from your worship liturgy, to light a pink candle, and to stammer unutterable words of praise.

And why is this such a joyful Sunday? Well, did you catch that announcement in the reading from Luke’s Gospel today? Good news is delivered to a young teenager named Mary. Unmarried as she is, she’s going to have a baby. And while many of us would have seen this news as catastrophic, Mary claims it for joy. Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”

We call her words the *Magnificat* and it is Mary’s song of triumph. Even though her child is yet unborn, his work not even begun, she rejoices in God’s work of salvation to lift up the poor and lowly and overthrow the oppressing powers. She has only the announcement. She has much labor, even sorrow yet to bear. But God has announced good news, so it is as good as done.

So did you catch that announcement? The Third Sunday in Advent is an interruption to a church season intended for repentance, waiting and inner preparation. But we tend to tune out most announcements. We see them as commercials. And maybe that's especially true with Good News. We're a culture so accustomed to bad news that we just tune things out. We just don't believe good news is true news. And the reality is that the announcement to Mary that she would bear a child did not strike even Mary as being particularly joyful. As often is the case with all of us, joy has little to do with outer circumstances – it is an act of faith. And even Mary has to jump into God's arms to get there.

Here's the scene. A very young girl is confronted by a strange being, an angel we now understand. Mary is startled, afraid. Angels always evoke fear first, and the first thing they say is always, "Fear not." Mary's response is normal: "I'm hearing from God; I must have done something wrong." So the angel reassures her: "You haven't done anything wrong. You have found favor with God." The point is not that Mary has done anything right or wrong, but that God will do something through her. God has chosen her – ordinary, poor, young, nondescript, non-important, non-person. God chose her for God's own reasons which she certainly didn't understand. And that is precisely the point. Why me? It did not seem like joyful news at first.

You see, there is a problem. Mary is already betrothed, promised to a man by the name of Joseph who has entered into a legal contract with her family, one of the conditions of which is her virginity. Her pregnancy will be a very big problem. The law regards her as already married, and in some places in Palestine, betrothal meant sexual activity. But Joseph knows there has been none, at least involving him.

So it was with great courage that young Mary told the angel, "Let it be to me according to your word," but she had to be deeply troubled. After all, who could blame her if she said "No." Remember, this is small town Galilee. Has anyone here ever lived in a small town? Even in our somewhat enlightened age, do you know what that is like? Can you imagine living in the slit-eyed world of a country village where people talk about you in scornful ways, where your reputation can be painfully damaged by malicious, small-town talk? Mary was a virgin, already promised to another. How would that Joseph respond? How would her parents take the news? Even overcoming all of that, what would happen to her and to her child in the days to come? What would her community do with her public shame? Would they call her son a bastard all of his days? This is heavy stuff for a small town girl.

Imagine how Mary felt as she made her journey to Judea to see her cousin Elizabeth. Was she filled with self-doubt, her hopes crushed by her own family? Did she question her own sanity? Maybe the angel was a dream, maybe her mind had played tricks on her. Yet she knew her own body. She knew she had not been with any man. Perhaps she felt angry. How could they treat her this way; how could God let them treat her this way? She felt so alone. Doubtless she dreaded seeing cousin Elizabeth, barren no more, her shame ended the same way Mary's had begun. Would Elizabeth lecture her as her parents had, but with the added smugness of her righteous pregnancy? Or would her cousin just shake her head and pity her, like Joseph, doubting her story altogether as if she were a foolish child? Elizabeth had her troubles, too: expecting her first born later in life, her husband the victim of a stroke, unable to work his turn in the Temple. Now, this

pregnant teenage girl is being sent to her home so she could handle the shame, not to mention the normal challenges of pregnancy and birth.

We can imagine these two women resenting each other, and in their physical and emotional state seething with anger like two bubbling pots, boiling over occasionally with harsh words. But no! Elizabeth does the unexpected. The moment she sees Mary, the first words out of her mouth are a blessing, probably the first blessing Mary has heard since telling anybody she was pregnant: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

Can you imagine how Mary felt when she heard those words? All the anger, all the curses, all the confusion, all the shame fell away when she heard those first words: “Blessed are you, Mary!” Never underestimate the power you have to bless people in God’s name. Never refuse the opportunity to offer encouragement to those whose hopes have been beaten down by life.

What we have here is a preview of the church, a model of what we do for one another. We come here to renew our hope in God when life is beating us up. And in spite of our own struggles and sorrows, we can say to another, “Blessed are you!”

And so we come to Mary’s moment. As Mary begins to come to grips with the mysterious and frightening thing that is happening to her – thanks in large part to the amazing grace of Elizabeth’s affirmation and blessing – after all that, it is time for Mary to say something. And when Mary finds her voice, it is quite a speech. It is full of awe and joy. We call it as the *Magnificat*. The ancient church sang it regularly, and Benedictine monasteries still chant it every night. Johann Sebastian Bach put it to some of the most glorious music ever written.

Now Mary can let go of her worries and simply rejoice in God’s promise that this new life will mean new life for all. And realizing that this *is* good news, Mary breaks out in song:

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.”

The *Magnificat* is Mary’s song of triumph – and that is why this Sunday is Gaudete Sunday. It’s joy, even in the midst of uncertainty. Even though her child is yet unborn, his work not even begun, her world a shambles because of Roman occupation, Mary rejoices in God’s work of salvation to lift up the poor and lowly and overthrow the oppressing powers. Remember, she has only the announcement to go on. There is so much yet ahead of her from the birth, escaping to Egypt, Jesus’ growing years, his time of teaching. But God has announced good news and that’s a pretty good foundation to build on. Her joy is unleashed by Elizabeth’s blessing.

Commenting on Mary's Magnificat, Kathleen Norris asks "How do I answer when the mystery of God's love breaks through my defensiveness and doubt? How do I answer when God calls me to join in God's daring new work? Am I so rich, so stuffed full of myself, my plans and my possessions that I in fact deny Christ a rightful place on earth?"<sup>2</sup>

Are we too full of our plans, our well-planned lives, that we cannot hear God's invitation? The Magnificat teaches us a simple truth: You cannot learn anything if you think you know it all. You can't receive love unless you admit there is a place in you that is empty and needs love to fill it. You cannot be lifted up unless you admit the lowliness of your inner poverty and need.

Beverly Roberts Gaventa, a Protestant, writes, "Mary is who we are. She is a person of faith who does not always understand but who seeks to put her trust in God. She is one who is blessed not because she sins less or has keener insights into the things of God. She is instead blessed, as we are, because she is called by God to participate in the work of God... To call Mary blessed is to recognize the blessedness of ordinary people who are called to participate in that which is extraordinary."

And that is what we, like Mary, are called to do and be. We are not blessed because we understand it all. We're not blessed because we sin less than others. We are blessed when we respond positively to God's call to join in what God is doing. And what God is doing, when we finally open our eyes, is indeed extraordinary.

We are all called to be like Mary, understanding that because God is, amazing things are possible beyond what this world believes. When the good news sinks into our skulls we see that with God all things are possible. When we finally open our eyes, like Mary we see that God's kingdom is breaking out all around us – and, please God, even within us. And when that happens in us, maybe then, as with Mary, it will be Gaudete Sunday. A season of joy! A time for rejoicing beyond what our cynical selves have come to accept.

I can't make you rejoice today. I can only urge you to listen to the announcements of God's arrival and get ready. I can only tell you to see and hear the signs of Christ's presence among us. I can only remind you that God is still at work and that you will see God's presence in the people around you, even in your own heart. I can only urge you to be awake and alert to the surprises God will bring you on the way towards that great day to come. I can only tell you to get ready to be surprised by joy, to be ready to let go and give in to the moment when God visits you with good news.

But did you catch that announcement? God did an amazing thing through a meek, uncertain, small town girl. Once she grasped the power of God and what God was doing, her heart erupted in joy. And just as with Mary, God will invite you to share in God's work. So go ahead and believe. Clap your hands and leap for joy. And, with Mary, go ahead and jump into the arms of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:42-45.

<sup>2</sup> Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary, Foreword.