

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me: he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoner; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrong doing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Luke 1:46-55

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, the mighty one whose name is holy. God's mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. God has shown great strength; and has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has helped God's servant Israel. In remembrance of God's mercy, according to the promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah and to their descendants forever.

"Mary's Song"

And Mary said:
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for God has been mindful of the humble state of God's servant.
Luke 1:46-47

Back when Rome ruled the world, the scandal that headlined the evening religious new in downtown Nazareth was Mary's pregnancy. Her pregnancy was upsetting for many reasons. The baby was conceived out of wedlock; Joseph (her betrothed) was not the father; Mary had broken Jewish laws regarding sexual conduct. As you know, the Bible interprets the event in a much different, good news way. The gospel writer Luke wrote: 'In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you . . . You will be with child and give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.'" (1:26-28, 31-32)

When poet Ann Weems wondered about what it was like for Mary, she wrote the poem, *Mary, Nazareth Girl* (Kneeling in Bethlehem).

Mary, Nazareth girl:
What did you know of ethereal beings with messages from God?
What did you know of men when you found yourself with child?
What did you know of babies, you, barely out of childhood yourself?
God-chosen girl:
What did you know of God that brought you to this stable
blessed among women?
Could it be that you had been ready,
Waiting,
Listening,
For the footsteps of an angel?
Could it be there are messages for us if we have the faith to listen?

To the spiritual dynamics of waiting, receiving, and listening, Rev. Luti added one more as she reflected on psalm the first two verses of psalm 42.

“Like a deer pants for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God,
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God,
When shall I see you face to face?”

In her advent devotional, ‘Desire,’ she wrote: Waiting is the hallmark of Advent, yet the Advent psalms and prophets speak more about longing than waiting. Panting, fainting, begging, crying desperate human need. Waiting can be active, but it’s rarely terrible and driving. Desire is visceral, like the crazed thirst of a wild animal in a parched land. God is a fierce and unrelenting need. Advent craves God. Do you? No, you aren’t thrashing through underbrush frantically seeking water. You don’t really relate to that panting deer. You don’t have experiences of God that feel that real. You’re no mystic. Although there was that moment when you heard a loon on the lake and you cried, couldn’t stop, didn’t know why, but so wished you did. Although there was that moment when you felt incomplete, a restlessness, you wondered what you were missing. Although there was that moment when you were suddenly and completely happy, consoled without cause, and you wish you could feel it again. Although there was that moment at the peace march, serving communion, stargazing in pure black night, when you grasped it whole, the way it is, the way it’s meant to be. Although there was that moment when your heart lurched listening to a story about someone who risked it all, who loved the way you want to, yes, you do. Although there was that moment with your defenses down and your suffering great when you just cried out, and then got scared: what if God comes? No, you’re no mystic, no thrashing deer. But there was that time . . .’

Years ago, when Flemish artist Robert Campin was commissioned to paint panels of the Annunciation that forms the altar in the Cloister in upper Manhattan, he had the opportunity

to interpret Mary’s visitation by an angel. In a reflection on his work, Elizabeth Canham wrote (*Weavings, Keep Alert*, p. 21): ‘The central panel of this altar piece shows Mary, seated on the floor to indicate her groundedness and humility, calmly reading the Scriptures. Gabriel is present, but Mary has not yet seen him so she is not backing away as she does in many representations of the Annunciation. She has also not yet seen the beam of light from a window across the room that ends beside her ear. Moving down the sunbeam is a baby Jesus who carries a cross over his shoulder. The artist is telling us that Mary is impregnated through her ear, and in her listening and accepting the Word, Christ takes form within her. On the left panel, the patrons of this painting are peering through the door. They are not just patrons, but participants in the story and, by implication, so are we. We are invited into a holy listening through which the seed of God’s Word may enter through our ears, take root in our heart, and begin to form us in the image of Christ.’

After saying “yes,” Mary hurried over to Elizabeth’s house to talk of babies and of faith. Before talking about proper nutrition, furnishings for the baby’s nursery, or the details of delivery, the two women joyfully wrapped the meaning of their unexpected and unexplainable pregnancies in faith. Elizabeth’s baby, John the Baptist, leapt at the news that he would be the prophet to proclaim the Lord’s coming. Mary broke out in song, praising God for fulfilling God’s promise to be with her and for entering history to make the world right. In the Magnificat, she rejoiced that God would turn life-diminishing tables of economic, political, and social injustice . . . upside down. Echoing the prophetic scriptures she sang of feasts for the poor and hungry, of God’s faithful presence with the least and lowly, and of the great mercies of God for those who fear him. Elizabeth exclaimed: ‘Blessed are you, Mary, and blessed is the child you will bear!’ Truly, Jesus is joy because the fullness of God dwells in Him. And blessed are we in our believing.

Prayer. Blessed be you O Lord, who rejoices with us as we support and stand with those whom You are lifting up. Amen.