

## **Sunday 22 December 2024 - Advent 4**

### **Luke 1:39-55**

#### **A Sermon by the Rev. Jackie Bullen**

When I was six I played the Angel Gabriel in my primary school's nativity play. I like to think I was typecast because of my angelic disposition, though I fear it had rather more to do with having blonde hair and a decent reading ability. That was the extent of my dramatic involvement until I played Snow White in a school production and was kissed by a boy and that was certainly the end of my career on stage.

I was a rather fidgety angel apparently, probably because my improvised wings, made of tinsel and coat hangers, kept poking me in the ribs. I solemnly told Mary that she would have a baby and announced good news of great joy to the shepherds only with a scowl on my face I am told. Nevertheless, the story unfolded, as it has so many countless times before and since.

The way we tell the story of the nativity, in popular culture, is a mixture of the accounts of Luke and Matthew. From Luke we get the annunciation to Mary, the journey to Bethlehem, the innkeeper and the manger, the shepherds and the heavenly host. Matthew provides the wise men, the star, and Herod. We don't tend to include in the story the episode we hear in our Gospel reading today, Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth, and the singing of the Magnificat.

Artistic licence may want us to rush from annunciation to the main event, but Advent is a season of waiting, and so it's here, and now, that we get to visit the hill country of Judea where, for three months after the annunciation, Mary stays with her cousin Elizabeth.

And this episode matters because it helps us to understand what the birth of the baby in Bethlehem means. Mary helps us to learn the habits of faithful waiting and expectancy, whose fruits are seen in justice and in hope.

Luke is silent on the reasons for Mary's visit to Elizabeth. We simply hear that 'In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.'

We know that she was young and betrothed to a man named Joseph. We have heard of the visit of the angel and the extraordinary request made of Mary; of her consent through which the Word is made flesh. Being pregnant before marriage, with a child of whom your betrothed is not the father, would have caused scandal in small-town Nazareth. And what would she have said to still the wagging tongues?

Could she have told them of the visit of Gabriel, of the fear and the excitement and the wonder that seized her, and the strange calm that followed once the angel had gone and she alone knew that she contained within herself the world's salvation?

It's perhaps no surprise that she made haste to see Elizabeth, mother to another child whose birth was announced by an angel, whose greeting shows that she, at least, is able to understand the unlikely truth that God is at work. These months of waiting give space for their understanding to deepen, for their imaginations to be formed, for the discernment of what God is doing.

And Mary's response to Elizabeth's greeting, the outpouring in song of the joy that has been pent up in her since the angel's visit, shows her to be a woman who has learnt the habit of expectancy, of faithful waiting.

Echoing in Mary's words is the story of Israel, of her forefathers and mothers in faith from the time God made his promise to Abraham that he would be their God and make them his treasured possession.

She adds her voice to that of Sarah, who laughed at the good news that she would conceive in her old age and bear a son through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

To that of Miriam, who sang of the Lord who triumphed gloriously in bringing his people from slavery to freedom in the exodus.

To that of Hannah, mother to the longed-for baby Samuel, who exulted in the Lord, as she proclaimed that the bows of the mighty were being broken and the feeble were girding on strength.

Taking her cue from the prophets, Mary sings of the hungry being filled and the proud scattered.

This is the song of a woman who comes from a people who have learned what it is to wait, to develop the habits of patience and expectancy that enable you to sit in the dark and look for the light even while circumstances tempt you to think that the dawn will never come.

Mary's song gives voice to all that, to the yearning and the expectancy sustained through the times of doubt and fear that God would not remember his promises.

And she proclaims that in the child she bears that hope is fulfilled.

She sings the Magnificat in the past tense.

The child she carries is tiny and already in him she rejoices that God 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.

This is how God remembers his promise of mercy, to Abraham and his children for ever: by being conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

For most of Israel's history it had been buffeted by its more powerful neighbours. It had faced slavery, oppressive rule, exile and persecution. The people's faith had been tested, and often found wanting.

Yet, the hope of salvation has been in the mouths of those whose bellies growl with hunger, of the lowly who've been told they have no place.

It is from them that we learn how to hold on to hope and love justly, how to discern God's presence in the unlikely and unexpected places that turn out to be consistent with how God acts all along.

We learn this by telling the story, praying it, making its promises our own, wrestling with it, doubting it, trusting it, because what Mary sings is the story of God's faithfulness, to Abraham and his children for ever.

The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem is how Mary's song is fulfilled.

He challenges the rich by taking on poverty, casts down the mighty by choosing humility, shows, in taking on vulnerable human flesh, that God is with us, and especially with those who have no home, no power, no privilege.

Mary, unmarried, pregnant, full of grace and courage announces that God's promises are met in the child she bears and she teaches us how to recognise the birth of Jesus as good news in a world where homeless people die on our streets, where the poor and the immigrants are despised, where children are starved by a war made possible through bombs supplied by other countries.

These are the people for whom the birth of Jesus is especially good news.

They may make for unwelcome characters in a nativity play and those of us who are numbered among the rich and the well-fed and the powerful may well prefer to keep them from the scene.

But Mary won't let us.

If we have been listening to the story unfolding throughout Advent, of the patriarchs' faith, the prophets' cries for justice, and John the Baptist's warning about the judgement that is coming upon the world, then we may recognise that it has been preparing us for Mary's song.

And depending on how we react we will either find ourselves among those being dethroned or joining in with her, singing of the mighty things God has done, greeting with joy the child she bears, and being a people of justice whose lives proclaim the hope that is coming into the world.