

12.24.2023 Advent 4

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2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:46b-55; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

“Here am I”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

On this Christmas Eve morning, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, we remember the story of the angel Gabriel and Mary. Mary’s story is well-known. Yet today’s reading from 2 Samuel, helps us remember that the God of Israel did not dwell in a house of cedar, but lived among Israel wherever they were. Mary’s story reminds us of how much God desires to be part of our lives within human community.

In the “*Magnificat*” or “Mary’s Song of Praise” sung a moment ago, Mary says, “*My soul magnifies the Lord.*” Mary’s song witnesses to the God who remembers the hungry and lowly, a God who lives within human community from generation to generation. Mary proclaims God’s holy name, reminding us that God scatters the proud, brings down the powerful, and sends the rich away empty.

Perhaps you are familiar with a slender little book of sermons titled, *Martin Luther’s Christmas Book*. In a sermon about “Mary’s Song of Praise,” Luther wrote,

You have got to feel the pinch of hunger in the midst of scarcity, and experience what hunger and scarcity are, [You have got to feel] when you do not know where to turn, to yourself, or to anyone else but only to God...For this reason, we are Christians and have the Gospel: that we may fall into distress and lowliness and that God may work in us.

Mary understood the God who lifts the lowly and gives strength to those in distress.

Many people may not realize it, but Martin Luther held a very high view of Mary. Luther believed in Mary’s immaculate conception, in her sinlessness, and in her assumption. In today’s gospel, the angel Gabriel told Mary that the child she would bear would be called the “*Son of God.*” Luther also called Mary by the ancient name, “*Theotokos,*” which means the “Mother of God.” Today, we celebrate that Mary, the “Mother of God,” gives birth to the “Son of God.”

In a Christmas sermon from 1531, Martin Luther wrote,

[Mary is the] highest woman and the noblest gem in Christianity after Christ. She is nobility, wisdom, and holiness personified. We can never honor her enough. Still, honor and praise must be given to her in such a way as to injure neither Christ nor the Scriptures.

Mary is the gem who reflects the light of her son, Jesus, the Son of God.

Luther wrote an *Explanation of the Magnificat* (1521), in which he said of Mary, “How then can we praise her?...Mary is nothing for the sake of herself, but for the sake of Christ...Mary does not wish that we come to her, but through her to God.”

This is the key to understanding Mary: Mary points us to Jesus. Therefore, Mary is called the “Mother of God,” the *Theotokos*. Mary points us to Jesus whom she carried and brought into this world. Mary represents humility and faithfulness before God. Mary responded fearlessly and courageously to Gabriel’s announcement, saying, “*Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be unto me according to your word.*”

Nowhere do we sense the tension between faith and reason as keenly as in the story of Mary. Mary asked the question that we all ask: “*How can this be?*” Much perplexed, Mary pondered and questioned Gabriel. Her question, “*How can this be?*” is the occasion for Gabriel’s words, “*For with God nothing will be impossible.*” This was the first Bible verse I committed to memory in the Japanese Bible, Luke 1:37, 「神にできないことは何一つない」 – “*For with God nothing will be impossible.*”

This is what we celebrate on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent: The God who continually moves us from despair to hope, from estrangement to reconciliation, from death to life. Like Mary we are moved through questions to faith, and from faith into understanding.

In Mary’s words, “*Here am I, the servant of the Lord,*” Mary takes no credit or honor for herself. Rather, Mary points to the God of justice, mercy, and love. Mary’s words remind us that Jesus is born to scatter the proud; to bring down the powerful; and to lift the lowly. Jesus is born to fill the hungry with good things, sending the rich away empty. Mary’s words, “*Here am I, the servant of the Lord,*” are revolutionary.

In our hyper-individualistic world, our highly factionalized world, and our world of allegiances to penultimate rulers, leaders, and political parties, Mary’s words point us to the ultimate ground and goal of history. Mary places herself in service to the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Israel, the Maker of heaven and earth. Mary is the gem who reflects the light of the world, Jesus Christ. Mary is nothing for the sake of herself but lives only for the sake of Christ. Mary challenges us also to say, “*Here am I, the servant of the Lord.*”

None of us can see into the future, and none of us knows how long or short our lives will be. Yet in Mary we are confronted with someone who placed her entire life within God’s plan for her and for the world. Mary grasped the long-secret mystery of God revealed to her. Mary believed, saying,

*“Let it be unto me according to your word.”* And so, Mary lifts our vision above the penultimate of this world’s rulers, leaders, and partisan nature of daily life.

Mary’s revolutionary witness doesn’t end here. Mary’s “Song of Praise” points to the brokenness of our world. Mary was a young woman living in a land occupied by a foreign Roman army. Though she was young, Mary also knew the disparity between the rich and poor, the proud and the hungry.

Today on Christmas Eve morning, Mary helps us see these realities in our own world – a world increasingly at war, a world of occupied lands, a world of great wealth and great poverty, a world crying out at Christmas for peace on earth. Mary’s revolutionary witness to us is a God for whom nothing is impossible. Mary encourages us to lift our vision higher, by using our lives, whether they are long or short in service to the impossible dream of a world that scatters the proud and lifts the lowly.

It seems impossible, but this story came to life for me as a young adult in another language in the Bible verse, Luke 1:37, 「神にできないことは何一つない」 – *“For with God nothing will be impossible.”*

May you also know the God for whom nothing is impossible, and may you respond with Mary, saying, *“Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”*

Overcoming the impossible in life begins with the words, *“Here am I.”*  
Amen.