



“STANDING IN NEED”
SCRIPTURE: LUKE 1: 46b-55
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
December 15, 2019
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

Luke 1:46b-55

1:46b "My soul magnifies the Lord,

1:47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

1:48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

1:49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

1:50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

1:51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

1:52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

1:53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

1:54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

1:55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

(Bring chair out and sit in the center of the chancel. Sit down and have a minute of quiet)

Breathe with me—just a regular breath. We're all breathing together.

Now pay more attention to your breath, in through your nose, out through your mouth. If you feel like you can, close your eyes. Keep breathing.

Imagine yourself floating in the atmosphere, above the planet—you are floating above North America far enough away to see the whole expanse of this hemisphere.¹

The contours of its geography are distant. You see the blues of oceans, the greens of land, the shape of islands, peninsulas, and continents.

Imagine yourself coming closer now, floating close enough to be above North Carolina, the shore and the piedmont and the mountains below you.

With your next breath imagine yourself floating down to just above the roof of Grace Covenant. You can see the whole building and property—the Garden, the playground, the parking lot and street full of cars, the rooftops of our three buildings.

Keep breathing. And imagine yourself floating down through the roof into the sanctuary, hovering just above your body where it is located right here. You see the top of your head and your shoulders. Notice what you are wearing, how your body is positioned.

With your next breath, slowly drop down into your body until you are fully present in your own skin. You feel your clothes on your back, the pew or chair supporting you, the back of your legs against your seat. Keep breathing. Notice your muscles, your joints, your bones supporting you. Notice how you feel in your body. (pause)

When you are ready, slowly open your eyes. Look all around you, behind you. Notice the colors, the surfaces, the light, the faces and bodies around you. You are here. We are here—in this sanctuary, together.

Your willingness to be fully present in community right now makes this a Holy moment. Staying present in this space—touches in to a deep need. The world's need. Our need. Even God's need.

We need each other.

It can be hard to see ourselves as standing in need. Presbyterians like to be the ones meeting others' needs, not the ones who need anything from others. That resistance to telling the truth about ourselves runs deep inside of us—and it trivializes our relationships, and it trivializes the church.

Stay present right now in your need.

See if you can actually touch in to what you need. Compassion. Support. Change. Healing. Maybe you need a friend. Maybe you need a second chance. Maybe you need accountability, or gentleness. Maybe you need health insurance or a job or a place to call home or people you can trust or relief from pain.

So keep breathing. Stay here, together.

Sung Refrain "And the world is about to turn."

She is not sure what to make of it. And she has every reason to be afraid. What is happening to her is dangerous. The weight of the world's expectations and judgments and cruelty is heavy. She is just a girl really—twelve or thirteen—the age when her culture expects her to move from a father's house to a husband's house.

Women's bodies are instruments—tools of accumulation and the transfer of wealth, containers for property and possessions for fathers and husbands.

She is anticipating marriage—the next step for a girl her age. That's when her dreams start to change, that's when she realizes something is shifting, something is happening.

An angel appears no less and tells Mary that she is pregnant—even though she is not married.

Luke tells the story of two miraculous pregnancies—Elizabeth's and Mary's.² But Mary's situation is different than Elizabeth's. Elizabeth is old. She has lived her whole life with her culture's judgment because she is childless. She carried the weight of the shame her culture taught her to feel about her body, about her failure. Her impossible pregnancy means liberation from that shame she has carried. Her pregnancy moves her into a social position of honor she thought she would never have.

But Mary's situation is the opposite of Elizabeth's. Mary's pregnancy does not liberate her from societal shame; it threatens her with societal shame. Mary is not being delivered from grief and sadness and judgment, she is ushered into a dangerous space—where her vulnerability is extreme. She could lose everything because of this pregnancy she didn't consent to, she didn't expect.

In Matthew's Gospel Mary's "situation" is really refracted through Joseph's dilemma. He has dreams that help him decide to stay with Mary—to go forward with the marriage even though she is carrying a baby that he knows is not his.

But in Luke's Gospel, it is Mary's dilemma alone. It is her, in her body, now occupied by another life, tangled up with an epic transition in a massive universe.

In that Holy moment—that dangerous, fraught, terrifying moment, everything changes.

And Mary is swept up into a course of events that is still playing out over 2000 years later.

Her body has continued to be occupied—appropriated by church fathers looking for ways to concentrate their power and to pacify her—and the rest of us, too. Mary’s courage, Mary’s radical wisdom, Mary’s power got distorted—and those church father’s tried to replace her with a meek and mild model of female submission.

If you can, close your eyes again. Notice how you are feeling. What it feels like for that tension, that appropriation, that distortion to be named. Where do you feel it in your body? Are you able to sit with the grief of what has been lost? Do you feel resistance? Do you feel sadness? Do you feel anger? Do you feel confused?

Be present here in this moment—in this memory of a girl brave enough to understand a divine purpose in her life, brave enough to understand that this unlikely gestation was about liberation of the oppressed, it was about social convention being overturned, it was about God choosing those society shames and blames and discards for the transformation of the world.

And that same brave girl is deployed to pacify, to oppress. If you are present in this moment you feel that violation somewhere. Look around. We need to feel that—the way the faith that is intended to liberate and empower is so easily shape shifted into a faith that pacifies and oppresses.

Sung Refrain: And the world is about to turn.

He isn’t sure what is going on, but he knows he needs to be there for his friend, Yusef. The police want to question Yusef, so 16 year old Korey Wise decides to go with him to the questioning—an act of friendship, a way to do right by Yusef and his family.

In that Holy moment, that moment of friendship and loyalty—that dangerous, fraught, terrifying moment, everything changes.

Even though Korey was no where near the crime that Yusef was being questioned about—the attack of a jogger in Central Park... even though Korey was no where near the crime, and even though he was only at the police department to support his friend, Yusef, Korey ended up being convicted and spending almost 14 brutal years in jail for a crime he did not commit. And two of those years were spent in solitary confinement.

“It was hell,” Korey said. “Pure hell. Every day you fight. You are not supposed to make it out.”

“How did you survive it all?” Someone asks Korey during this visit to Asheville on this Friday. “Music,” Korey says, “I kept my music in my head. I let it talk to me. I let it tell me things.”

“How do we walk around with all this trauma in our bodies, because I have been through the same thing as you. I have been incarcerated,” a young black man from Asheville asks Korey. “You learn that there aren’t too many people who really have your best interest at heart. You learn that,” Korey said.

“Who is Korey Wise, after all you’ve been through?” asks another young black man from Asheville, who is trying to turn his life around.

“I am a vessel for you. I am a vessel for who needs me,” Korey said.

Don’t look away, don’t dissociate, don’t leave your body.

Korey is asking us to stay present—to be present in the pain of what happened to him, to be present in the pain of what is happening to people of color in our country, to generations of young black and brown men who have been distorted and contorted by the narratives we have all been taught about them—that they are dangerous, that they are incapable, that they are disposable, that they are better off dead if they stop serving the system that is set up to keep them pacified, terrified, identified with what’s wrong—when they are really being used as a smoke screen for what’s wrong—our narrative is wrong.

The faith that gestated in Mary is the faith that transforms the world, not conforms to the world. The God we worship is a liberator—and you are being asked to take that into your body, to let that fill you with a sense of promise and possibility. To let that free you from the burdens of conformity to a culture that tells you that you are only worth the wealth that you generate. That lie has left us a shadow of who God is calling us to be.

Sung Refrain: And the world is about to turn.

I was about ten or eleven when it was my turn to be Mary in the Christmas pageant. A baby blue sheet from home draped over my head. The song I had to sing by myself felt impossible. The church taught it to me as a lullaby and I struggled to sing both loud enough and soft enough to be the Mary they taught me to be.

I remember the feeling of heat coming off my body from the nervous energy that had nowhere to go. I remember the feeling of my body shaking. It felt strange—like there was something that needed to change, something wasn’t right.

I can feel those sensations even now when my body gets caught up in the dissonance between God’s liberation and the church’s expectation. Staying present to it all can be painful sometimes.

And I think about Mary—not the meek and mild Mary, but the brave and determined Mary, the Mary that sings in the face of danger, grief, fear, resistance.

Mary's song—that is how she sits in the trauma of her occupied body, her occupied culture, her occupied gender, her occupied identity, her occupied faith and holds on to the truth of God's vision of liberation tangled up in her body.

It is her vulnerability and the strength that her vulnerability gives her that makes Mary able to give birth to God's hopes for the world. It is her capacity to be present to her own need that allows her to stand in what the world needs from her.

Mary's telling us a something about ourselves—and the creative, healing potential that gestates within us all.

We access it through vulnerability, not in spite of vulnerability. Our need for God **is** God's need for us. We are vessels, vessels for each other.

And the joy of standing tall in our need is Mary's song to us—it is not a lullaby to sing us to sleep. It is a rallying cry for us to kindle the courage to give ourselves to the task of birthing a world waiting to be born.

*Sung Refrain: And the world is about to turn
(Go right into the Hymn" My Soul Cries Out With a Joyful Shout: The Canticle of Turning")*

¹ This embodied practice is adapted from an exercise in *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies* by Resmaa Menakem (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 156.

² I am grateful for the scholarship on this comparison between Mary and Elizabeth by Turid Karlsen Seim, "The Virgin Mother: Mary Ascetic Discipleship in Luke," in *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine, 89-105.