

"Bearing Christ to the World"

Mary, Mother of Our Lord
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 1:46-55

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We know the story that unfolded last week in Afghanistan in the dangerous and remote mountains of the Nuristan Province. We know that ten people (including six American medical missionaries) were shot to death while returning from a two-week mission to provide free eye surgery to the poorest people in that nation. We know that the medical team represented the International Assistance Mission, and partnered with the charitable Christian group, the Mennonite Central Committee. We know they knew their work was dangerous; that there were risks involved. We also know they loved the poor people they served, and they went on that mission willingly, with a sense God had called them to that particular service.

No doubt some would say they were foolish and naïve. But perhaps they were neither. Instead, perhaps they were most wise to the way of God—how God purposes to bring about his kingdom, and what that kingdom looks like.

No doubt some would say **Mary** was foolish and naïve. In Luke's Gospel today, we hear her profound joy as she proceeds through her pregnancy. Whatever misgivings she may have had initially about carrying Jesus are not noted here. Even so, there was still risk involved in bearing a child. For Mary was engaged but not yet married, which was scandal enough in Jewish society. She had no friends in powerful places, no purse strings to speak of. Yes, she was poor, powerless, and pregnant in a culture where reputation and honor were everything, and the status you had in society pretty much stayed the same throughout your life...unless something dramatic happened.

Well, Luke's entire Gospel is telling us something dramatic **did** happen that changed everything. Earlier in this 1st chapter in Luke, Mary learns through the Angel Gabriel that she will bear a child who will be Son of the Most High (in other words, Son of God), that he will come to save his people, and his kingdom will never end. In today's lesson, located in the middle of that 1st chapter, Mary sings a song of joy, feeling blessed, praising God for this turn of events. And she describes the way of God—how God purposes to bring about his kingdom, and what that kingdom looks like. Mary sings, not just about the good things God is doing for **her**, but the good things God is doing for **all** God's people. It's an entire reversal of fortune! Those who have been powerless, suffering in poverty, and under oppression, are lifted up, filled with good things, shown mercy. Mary sings that God is remembering and fulfilling the loving promises he made to his people so long before. The interesting thing is that she sings as if it is already happening! Jesus is still *in utero*, hasn't been born yet, hasn't been teaching and preaching, working miracles, dying on the cross. Yet Mary, anticipating what God will do in the future

at the end of all time declares that **already** that future has been set into motion by God through his Son Jesus.

I know we look at Mary and wonder how she could sing with such hope and conviction. She was a nobody—a poor, young Jewish woman in a backwater province in the Roman Empire. And there is no indication in Luke that those things changed the moment she conceived.

Plus you and I still have the poor and suffering and “nobodies” with us today. Not just the destitute in inner-cities or third-world nations, but people struggling in all walks of life who wonder what this world’s coming to, and where God might be. The kingdom of God doesn’t seem to be anywhere near us, but the power of ruthless leaders and corrupt governments, money-hungry institutions and selfish individuals seems terrifyingly close at hand, bearing testament to the presence of sin and evil.

Well, call her foolish and naïve, but Mary will risk bearing this child into the world because she knows she is carrying the Messiah, the hoped-for One whose being with us changes everything. Which means she is wise to the way of God.

Okay, back to my opening comments about the ten medical missionaries gunned down in Afghanistan. Were the ten foolish and naïve, after all? Well, supposing those who died, who had journeyed to care for the Afghan sick and suffering, **knew** God had already begun his work of transforming his creation, **knew** God had already set into motion a new age and his glorious kingdom with the sending of his son Jesus into our world. Supposing the team members **believed** Jesus himself had given his life for their sake, and had been raised from the dead—the first fruits of a new life they all would experience where death would no longer have dominion. And supposing the ten medical missionaries who were killed **knew** their work, their self-giving to the poor, anticipated what God promises to do for those of low degree at the end of all time. If so, then that would render them neither foolish nor naïve. Instead, they journeyed wise and purposeful and joy-filled. Their actions during their two-week medical mission were consistent with God’s actions we read throughout the Bible. They knew what the kingdom looked like. Their serving declared as loudly as Mary’s song that God’s planned future for his children had already begun. And they chose to live in that truth. They were determined to bear Jesus Christ to the world, just as Mary did 2,000 years ago.

I read an essay this week by another medical missionary of sorts, this time in our own nation. Dr. Scott Morris serves at the Church Health Center in Memphis, Tennessee. He treats people who have few financial resources, but who often have a deep confidence in God. He says that every time he walks into a patient’s room, he makes a point to ask how they are feeling emotionally before they get down to how they are feeling physically. Morris writes, “More often than not, my patients respond this way: ‘Fine and blessed.’”

I guess you could say they speak the way Mary sings.

But Morris admits there are challenges in poverty medicine. See, he isn't naïve. One of the biggest challenges is that you are capable of only doing so much. He says, "Poverty generates overwhelming needs." Maybe that's his risk, you know? Mary risks her reputation bearing Jesus. The ten in Afghanistan risk their lives. Morris, through his vocation, knows he cannot solve every problem he meets, which risks leading him into despondency and hopelessness, which could ultimately turn him from serving at all—why do so, if no good can come of it? Then he tells a story about Rosemary, who was mentally ill and had poorly controlled diabetes. Two years earlier, her right leg had to be amputated. When he entered the examining room, he could smell the odor of gangrene in her left foot. Morris told her they would need to amputate her other leg. Rosemary began to ask him, "Has God abandoned me?" She lived alone without an income. Morris replied, "No, God has not abandoned you because neither I nor the Church Health Center will abandon you and we will do all we can to help you through this ordeal." Now, inside himself, he worried about how she would cope when returning to her home. He worried about her heating bill. Ultimately, there was only so much he could do. But that much he **would** do, and his actions would bear Christ to her. In fact, his actions anticipate the future God promises for his people, and declare aloud that that future has already begun. And despite the risks in his serving, he gathers strength for his work from the stories of his other patients who in their poverty, consistently tell him they know God has blessed them.

How will you and I bear Christ to the world? Where do you and I go every day that we can, through our actions, anticipate what God will do in his future kingdom, at the end of all time? What is it you and I can do that sometimes seems foolish, naïve, or downright risky, but that we know is simply declaring aloud the truth that Mary sings? This the truth that God's good kingdom has already been set into motion through Jesus Christ our Lord, and we know what this kingdom looks like. May you and I choose to live in that truth. **Amen.**