

Good News/Hard Times

I acknowledge heavily relying upon Mary Schertz's commentary on Luke.

Have you ever noticed that when people share about the times they've felt closest to God, it often is around the time when they've gone through serious hardship. Facing challenges, losses, unwanted endings, in looking back, they've seen God at work. They've grown in spiritual and emotional maturity. The family of God was there to comfort them and walk with them.

Good news isn't always received as good news. Being favored in God's sight may lead you into the hardest time of your life. For Mary, she's just a girl. She is engaged to be married. They apparently haven't slept together so being told you are going to become pregnant before the wedding, before sleeping with your husband, would make you wonder just how good this news and favored status is. Nowadays, having a baby outside of marriage is barely a cause for concern. There is little stigma. But in that time, it definitely did not leave the impression that you were favored by God, but that you had done something shameful. Or something shameful had been done to you. We know from the Gospel of Matthew that Joseph struggled to accept this "most honored woman" who was pregnant with someone else's child and was secretly plotting to divorce her which would have had a devastating impact on Mary and Jesus.

To me, yes, it is a miracle that Jesus would be born this way, but another miracle is Mary's readiness to receive this "Good News" that has some potentially difficult and even dangerous elements to it. I wonder

what kind of person the young Mary was, for her to be so yielded, so ready to receive this message and the will of Lord concerning her body and her life. In Mary Schertz's commentary on Luke, she says that Mary (the subject of the story in Luke) would have been familiar with others in her faith tradition who had been singled out and favored by God, and lead exciting lives, but hardly easy.

Certainly the appearance of an angel of the Lord and the assurance that God has seen her and has chosen her would help her to agree. What if we had that assurance that God has seen us and chosen us to make a difference in the world? Would we be like Mary and relatively quickly say, Yes! Or would we have to argue with the angel a bit longer or walk away in doubt or shame?

It is clear that God is the actor here, the one making it happen. Mary is simply consenting to it. The incarnation of Jesus is the result of God's miraculous action.

Schertz points out that in Mary saying yes to God and in becoming God's servant, we have a prototype of discipleship here. This is what faithful obedience looks like, even in light of Good News/Hard Times.

Do you ever wonder what Mary's parents thought about their daughter even perhaps wondering if she was delusional to believe that God had chosen her of all girls to bear God's son who would make her famous? If I were the parent, I probably would have doubted her and despaired that she's just ruined her life. All of my dreams for her life were going to go up in smoke by this ridiculous situation in which she found herself and even consented to.

Let's take a closer look at Mary's response. She sings! She prophesies, she quotes Scripture!

Mary's song:

Two parts: Mary's personal joy at what God has done for her. The Common English Bible translates verses 46-47 this way:

With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.

Mary is full of joy, exuberant even!

Here in the safety of her cousin's home, she pronounces that this pregnancy is a blessing, despite the dangerous and unusual circumstances. The safety of that home and that relationship and her trust in God likely enabled her to joyfully proclaim this blessing.

Mary has a gritty faith in God her Savior. Her joy is not just for herself but for everyone. She says,

God shows mercy to everyone,

from one generation to the next,

who honors him as God.

And then Mary narrates the Good News/Hard Times reality.

For the lowly, the poor, the downtrodden, God's salvation is on the way! But that means Hard News for the arrogant, the rich, the powerful. Their pride, their influence and their abundance is about to change and God is going to get the credit or the blame for it, depending on which side you find yourself. Clearly Mary sees herself as one of the lowly, the poor, the downtrodden, because how would she be rejoicing if

she was about to lose her influence or her wealth or her status? We are invited to see it from her perspective, to rejoice with her in this reversal of God's blessing.

This is where the prosperity Gospel has it wrong. Both in this passage and in OT passage for today, Isaiah 61, which Jesus quotes in Luke 4 as the heart of his ministry, there is no mistaking that God is on the side of those who have been forgotten, trampled on, who have been looked down upon. And what does God want to do, but to make things right. To improve the lot of the poor, imprisoned, the ill. Even if it means the wealthy and powerful have less than what they're used to. It doesn't sound like they are going to voluntarily give it all up but that God is somehow going to act in a way that causes this outcome.

Some in today's world would say this sounds like socialism. But let's remind ourselves, that this is the Bible. This is what Jesus said he was all about. Good News is sometimes hard news. It just depends on your perspective.

For those of us with more, perhaps we learn to humble ourselves and give away more of our privilege voluntarily so that we can rejoice with Mary.

For those of us who definitely identify with her and Isaiah's message to the prisoners, the food insecure, the poor, the ill, let us wholeheartedly rejoice with Mary in what God is doing on our behalf. Let us have that kind of faith that says my God has done great things for me and holy is his name!

Last week's Scripture passage in 2 Peter 3 about not mistaking God's timing for slowness, but as God's patience so that more may come to repentance really struck me. I definitely think God is too slow in resolving the war in Ukraine, the war in Israel/Palestine and all the corruption and desperate

circumstances in many Global South countries that leads to people flocking to Europe and to our border for a chance at a better life. How long, Lord? Give me new eyes to see your patience, Lord, your heart for people to repent.

How can we be more like Mary who lives a life of openness and receptivity to the Lord, who can rejoice in the Good News/Hard News? How can we grow in our trust that God's salvation is near at hand? And proclaim that with our whole being? Can we find a way in our longing and in our waiting to be so sure like Mary that, despite all appearances to the contrary, God is going to show up?

Let us affirm with Mary that salvation is personal and spiritual and also communal and material.

Schertz, Mary H. 2023. *Luke: Believers Church Bible Commentary*. Believers Church Bible Commentary Series. Newburyport: Herald Press.

<https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=7254460>.

