

Luke 1: 39-55

Where is God: A Sermon on Hope

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©Rev Dr. Susan E. Cartmell

The Congregational Church of Needham

Our worship theme this month is Hope. We come to church these days seeking hope especially now when the days grow short. In this season before Christmas we come to remember the most precious stories of our faith, but we also come together because we know we are searching for something. Even when we do things just right - find spectacular presents, throw impressive parties and stay on schedule- which is virtually impossible, we know that there is more to Christmas than a mad dash to the finish line. We gather each week to consider the kind of hope that is found in the heart of the Bible story. Nowhere is that hope more poignant or present than in the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Now Mary is arguably the most famous woman of all time. But she did not start out famous. She was a young girl in a society where women had no legal standing, or economic power. She was a country girl from Nazareth an outpost of the Roman Empire. She was a Jew, hailing from people who had centuries of misfortune behind them and few prospects ahead of them. To top it all off, Mary was a woman in an embarrassing situation. She was pregnant before her wedding, a situation that women have dreaded throughout history.

She believed that an angel had told her that her child was to be a prophet who would lead the people. She believed that God needed her to use her life in an unusual way to further God's mission. Even though she found herself in a situation which many people would have found hopeless, Mary had not lost hope. A hope was born in her that was inspiring to behold.

Let's look at Mary to see what we can learn about hope for our lives today.

In the first place hope GIVES YOU PURPOSE AND HELPS YOU FIND IT. Mary found hope for her life when she saw that she had a job to do, and God needed her to do it. Finding that you are needed is a

game changer. Discovering a call is different from finding a job. If you have a deep sense that God needs you then you can face any challenge with ingenuity and creativity. Things may get you down but you don't lose hope because your life has focus and direction. That sense of purpose pervades your whole being, and calls for your best, so the world becomes a stage for the hopeful things you enact each day.

Artists love the moment when Gabrielle came to Mary; and it is one of the most popular subjects in art history. Some art depicts Mary with her hand up, as though warding off the future. Some shows her with her head bowed as though trying to accept the challenge of this complex assignment. Much of the art depicts a woman with so many questions she can barely contain them. So what you are saying is that I will have a baby out of wedlock? And the baby will be holy? He will grow into a great rabbi, a prophet, a messiah? God wants this to happen to me? God needs me for this assignment? One reason artists find this moment so fascinating is because it is so full of the most basic human emotions and questions we all face in life. People who live hope with take risks. They imagine things other people have ruled out. Some are driven to think outside the box, and step up eagerly to the new assignments that life is offering. Other people, for whatever reason, rule themselves out, or turn away, or settle for what they know. God sends angels to all of us; they don't all have wings. They push us to ask the questions. What does God ask of me? What should I do with my life?

If we are open to it hope comes in various forms to bring us a fuller life, if we will risk responding.

Several weeks ago the Boston Globe Magazine ran a wonderful story about an architect from Cambridge, Paul Fallon. In 2010 Fallon was living in Cambridge, an architect and divorced father of two grown young adults. He had his life all set with a good job and a routine he loved. He liked the way he had set things up and started every morning early with his morning bike ride to yoga. One January morning he arrived at the office prepared to continue work on the new Vernon Cancer Center at Newton Wellesley Hospital, but all morning friends called him to see if he had heard about the earthquake in Haiti. Paul Fallon had done some volunteer work in that poorest of island countries and friends worries that he would be upset by the earthquake. In the weeks that followed the earthquake split open more than an island nation to the south of Florida; it split Fallon wide open too. He sent money to an internet site, applied to volunteer with Habitat for

Humanity to take a stint there re-building homes, but over time he thought long and hard about what Haiti needed from him and what he needed to do. Fallon writes, " I intuited that Haiti had something to offer me, something that would nourish my soul, soften my brusque nature, and stir compassion I thought long lost." ("Finding Hope in Haiti" by Paul Fallon, Boston Globe Magazine November 16, 2014 p. 33)

Several months later he met a group of people who wanted to plan a trip to Haiti to re-build homes and start work on an orphanage. Paul took his son Andy that August and they spent two weeks. He writes about his trip and how it changed his life in a new book - *Rebuilding Haiti, Redrafting a Life*. "I contemplated why I found such peace in this traumatic land. Over the next three years I re-visited Haiti 17 times, and eventually quit my job to return half of each month.

What Mr. Fallon discovered was that God had an opportunity for him that would serve the needs of some of the poorest people in this hemisphere and also the needs of Mr. Fallon. Hope comes when your unique passion connects with the world's great needs. When you see that God needs you it can change your life, and give you hope. Mary realized that God needed her. She could do the rest. She had hope for her life. She knew what she was born to do.

In the second place, Sometimes the most hopeful things we do in life are the hardest ones. Most of us get tripped up trying to make a nice life when God offers us an adventure that call for everything we have got to give. An adventure that will test us and rankle us and provoke us and challenge all our assumptions about our lives and ourselves. That kind of enterprise will awaken us to who we really are. In those moments of testing we will meet friends we never expected to find. We will face our fears, and hope won't be a worry. It will be a way of life.

Yesterday on the Moth Radio Hour (<http://themoth.org/posts/episodes/1425>) one young woman told a story of going to Addis Abba in Ethiopia to adopt her son. Her friends in the Middle West had been supportive, but she never knew what friendship was until she met the crew of folks who were adopting with her. At the end of the process they all had their babies but her son was detained because of a glitch in the paperwork. The

group of people might have all left her to fend for herself in this foreign land, but instead they all stayed for hours in a government office until her son's paperwork came through.

In that moment where everything she knew was tested, she had bonded with strangers who had become a family. She was so full of hope that it hurt.

Finally, the story of Christmas reminds us that God needs each of us.

If God could take a nobody like Mary and make her the most famous woman that ever lived anything is possible for you and me. We tell ourselves that it is the world leaders who will make the biggest difference. We tell ourselves it is the Nobel laureates who will write the next chapters in the story of civilization. We imagine the movie stars set the world on fire. Surely they have the kind of power that the world gives. With it some make a huge impact on many lives. But so often in God's wisdom it is the unlikely heroes who really make the most impact. The Bible says God has a marked preference for ordinary people.

God seeks the underling, the forgotten, the lost. Why? Why does God look with favor on the lowliness of His servants? Why does God seek nobodies? Jesus said that God is like a Sower of Seed, and He roams the world throwing seeds around with reckless abandon. We all hear from an angel like Gabrielle from time to time but the more powerful among us are also the most distracted. They have so many options. Mary did not have enough power to have many options, but she qualified for the mother of Jesus because she knew what a gift it was to be chosen. *God has scattered the proud in the thought of their hearts, brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.*

There is a new movie out this weekend about the man who cracked the Enigma Code during World War II. The film is entitled "The Imitation Game". Alan Turing was the man who realized that the only way to crack the code would be to build a machine, a rudimentary computer to run through the possible combinations of code. Though he was a mathematical genius, his people skills were not his strength. He had trouble communicating or even looking people in the eye. Shy to the point of reclusive, Turing was often disappointed and frustrated even when he was authorized to build the machine designed to crack the Enigma Code. The

team of mathematicians working with him was an odd group and it included one woman, herself a mathematical genius. At one point in the film this woman reminds Turing of the hopeful truth he has forgotten. Sometimes it is the people whom no one imagined anything of, who actually do the thing no one imagines. This is the theme that runs throughout this film. Think about it. Sometimes it is the people whom no one imagined anything of, who actually do the thing no one imagines.

The most hopeful words in our Bible are spoken by a young girl that no one imagined anything of, a girl who did the thing that no one saw coming, and gave birth to the child that no one thought would ever come. She reminds us that God has not forgotten Israel so God won't forget us. Somehow this old story, keeps coming back to remind us that hope is always just a whisper away, and angels are all around wearing street clothes, and God has got this.