

The Blessing of Belief: Luke 1:39-56

The Rev. Dr. Susan Mullin Moudry '10
Coordinator of Clergy and Lay Excellence
The Western PA Conference of The United Methodist Church



Christmas is coming. I can feel it. I can see it in the decorations and hear it in the songs. If your house is anything like mine, you've been counting down the days. For us that means two Advent calendars that my daughter begs to do as soon as she's up. Forget breakfast or whether her brother is up yet; we're right on to "Can we open the calendar to read some more of the story? Could we glue another cotton ball on Santa's beard?" And I understand that excitement, because I feel it too. In fact it's kind of a long-standing joke with my dad that he will say, "Christmas is coming," almost any time of the year.

But what is it about Christmas that makes us so excited, so desperate for the day to come? The answer to that question could be a lot of things, and surely Jesus' birth ought to be first among them; still, I think it's also why the Scripture about Mary and Elizabeth is important for us to hear. There's something captured in the *anticipation* of Christmas that matters.

When Mary came to visit, Elizabeth said, "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished." Or we might say, blessed is she who had hope. Hope in the word of God. Mary is blessed because she believed what God told her. And that's a very big deal, because it means Mary *believed* she would give birth to God's son. And there are plenty of reasons for her *not* to believe—reasons that undoubtedly the people around her, maybe even her friends and family, would have reminded her about. For one, she was a pregnant, unmarried woman. Yet Mary believes and has hope. And for this reason she is filled with so much joy that she breaks out in song. The joy overpowers everything else as Mary is given hope for the future.

You may know something of that hope and joy—it's why you get so excited for Christmas every year. Little kids often know something about this hope and joy, too—and they're excited for more than just presents. When asked "Who was there that first Christmas?" many will answer, "Jesus!" They believe it. They are ready for it: Jesus came, and God is with us. They believe Christmas means something important than presents, and that hope makes them excited. Right, parents? They tell their families about Jesus and share their joy with us.

But believing isn't always easy, particularly once we've "grown up." Believing often takes courage, because there is so much happening in the world that would make us think Jesus is not coming and God is not paying any attention at all. You could give me a list, I'm sure, like the wildfires that rage out of control in the West Coast states and consume people's homes and lives; or the families who continue to grieve the loss of people they love through tragedies that don't make any sense; or the nations at war and on the brink of war; or dare I even mention the political atmosphere—at home and around the world. Sometimes it seems as though the list never ends. In fact, I regularly hear people commenting that our world is only getting worse.

So to believe that God is with us—and not to let all those awful things consume us—is a courageous act. Mary knew that. She had little social status, and she probably felt very alone as she waited for the baby to come, waited for God's promises to come true. It would have been easy for her *not* to rejoice and *not* to believe. Recently, a friend of mine who lost her father during the fall months right before Christmas demonstrated to me what it means to have courageous belief in God's promises. As a Christmas gift to

each woman in our small group, she gave a framing of a Frederick Beuchner quote. It says: “Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid. I am with you.” Right. That is our belief. That is our courageous hope. It’s not a hope that says life is easy; it’s a hope that confesses God is in control. Mary’s hope—and my friend’s—was her trust in God. Things will get better; God’s promises are true.

It makes me think of the famous poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow titled “Christmas Bells.” When Longfellow wrote the poem, he could have easily been described as without hope. His first wife had died early in their marriage, and his second wife died after being burned when her dress caught fire. He was devastated. It was 1861, and the United States was at war. By 1863, Longfellow’s son Charles had joined the war effort on behalf of the Union. His father didn’t want him in the war. That November Charles was badly injured. He survived, but his life was forever different. Yet on Christmas Day, 1863—in the midst of war and personal turmoil—Longfellow wrote these words:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
and wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;
“For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.”

With all the bad going on in the world around him, Longfellow believed and was able to confess hope. God is in control and will make things right, says the poem.

In the midst of a difficult situation and a world that did not understand her, Mary believed that God’s promises would come true, and this belief gave her hope. We too, like Mary and virtually all those who’ve come before us, find ourselves in difficult places. Places that seem hopeless. But the truth is that when we believe—believe that Christmas is coming, Jesus is coming—just like Mary, we are blessed with hope and even joy. And just like Mary, our anticipation of Christmas can become a sort of proclamation.

Remember the Scripture: after Elizabeth calls Mary “blessed” for her belief in what God told her, Mary starts to sing. She sings a song of praise, the Magnificat, as it’s been called. “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.” First she shouts praises of joy, because God has seen her. Then she sings, “From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me.” Mary takes the blessings of hope and joy she has received and shouts them out. She sings about all the amazing, wonderful things God has done and will do. She shares her gifts of hope and joy. And in doing so, she does become a blessing to everyone else. Her belief in God and the hope and joy it gives to her is passed on to us.

You see, hope and joy will lead us to proclamation, just as it did for Mary. We can declare our praises by also rejoicing in God our Savior because . . . well, fill in the blank. What has God done for you? What gives you hope these days? I think the list could be long. Longer than the doom-and-gloom list we made just a few minutes ago. My spirit rejoices because, even as I prepared this message, evacuation orders were lifted in California and the fires were coming under control. My spirit rejoices because in all the places that faced major natural disasters this year, the church is there and walking with the people who have suffered. My spirit rejoices because there are people who will give up their ownership of Christmas day and spend it eating and sharing with people they don’t know to demonstrate the good news that God sees. My spirit rejoices because of the stories that people you tell me about amazing things God has done in their lives.

Share your blessings. Declare to your neighbors and your families that everything is *not* spinning out of control! God is here. Jesus is coming, and everything will be different. Everything will turn out exactly as God has planned. The world is in good hands. When we believe, as Mary believed, we anticipate the coming Christ. And we know our anticipation matters. The hope and the joy it brings matter.

This year I encourage you to keep your Christmas lights up a little longer, let your tree linger a while, sing Christmas songs with the joy of a preschooler, wrap presents to give away, and spend time with your family, even if it’s difficult. Through these little things you will be a blessing to others—you will bless them with the hope and joy of belief. You will show the people around you that there is something more than this world we see. God sees and pays attention. God is always on the way. You will help others to anticipate the good news of Christmas, as they too receive the gifts of hope and joy.

So as you get ready for Christmas, in all the hustle and bustle that will undoubtedly fill the rest of the days before it arrives, go singing your own song of praise about what God has done. And like Mary, tell someone else why you rejoice. Christmas is coming. It won’t be long now. Jesus is on the way.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.