

Radiant Resilience
December 23, 2018

Together with churches down through the centuries and around the world,
we open the Scriptures this morning to the Christmas story.
Have you ever asked *why* Luke tells the Christmas story?

Only 2 of the 4 gospel writers include the birth narrative.

In the Apostle Paul's letters to the churches, written some 30 years before to Luke's gospel,
we find nothing about a stable or a manger,
about angelic pronouncement or trembling shepherds,
about a guiding star or wise-men.

Why? What's going on in the world of Luke's listeners
that makes the story of Jesus' birth so essential and so compelling?

Has something changed that has brought an urgency to this incredible story?
Absolutely.

As Luke writes it's about 80AD when the whole world has been turned upside down.

Several years earlier, in 70AD, Israel suffered a tragic defeat of enormous proportions.
The Romans leveled Jerusalem and destroyed the temple,
leaving not one stone upon another.

Over a million people died through violence and famine –
and those were just the civilians.

The soldiers were put to death with the exception of 97,000,
who were taken captive and became either slaves or sport in the Roman games.

Multiply the downing of the Twin Towers by 1000
and you'll begin to grasp the massive anguish and disorientation
in the wake of these catastrophic events.

Add to that, tensions are growing between the Jesus followers and the Jews.
Increasingly, the Christians are being expelled from the synagogues,
making them the perfect scapegoat
for everything that is going wrong in the Roman Empire.

Everything Israel had longed for and hoped had been wiped out.
Their religion seems to have failed them.
The Empire has rejected them and set up laws that keep them oppressed.
They are defeated; there's no fight left in them.

Into this reality on the ground Luke begins to write,
not a historical narrative just for the sake of writing history.
but a story that will magnetically draw his listeners
out of their despair and disorientation and into hope . . .

He will write a story that continues to draw humanity
out of despair and disorientation and into hope for 2,000 and counting.

So this morning, as we retell this story,
What facts on the ground are overwhelming you? (LUCY?)
Where do you feel defeated, disoriented, confused, traumatized?
In *that* place, may you hear this story afresh with an open heart.

The story opens with a real attention grabber.
The Archangel Gabriel makes two visitations.

Gabriel first appears to Zechariah, the father-to-be of John the Baptist,
who, we discover, has let the facts on the ground
turn his disappointment into cynicism.

This is the perfect opening story, because God knew
The biggest obstacle to restoring hope is cynicism.

Listen in as Gabriel tells Zechariah of the coming of his son. Luke 1:16-17
**Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer.
Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John.
You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,
for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord.**

To this wonderful announcement of hope, our cynic replies:
"How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

Wait a minute . . . You not looking at the facts on the ground.
You don't know what I've been through!
What proof will you give me that any of this is possible?

OOPS. Zechariah's about to get his hand slapped for his cynicism.

I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God . . .
You're going to trust the facts on the ground
instead of the message of the Archangel sent by God?

But now, since you didn't believe what I said,
you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born.
For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time."

Ouch!
This opening story sends its message loud and clear.
Hope is coming – Watch out for cynicism!"

Having put cynicism in check, Luke now tells of Gabriel's second visitation,
this time to a young woman named Mary.

Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!
Don't be afraid, Mary . . . for you have found favor with God!
You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus.
He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High.
The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David.
And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

A stunning announcement.
And instead of responding with cynicism, Mary responds with curiosity.
"But how can this happen? I am a virgin."
Instead of, "Wait a minute. I don't buy it," it's, "Wow, tell me more."

And Gabriel does:
"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.
So the baby to be born will be holy,
and he will be called the Son of God.

Now, Luke's readers are hooked.
They're not going to put the story down.
If Mary dared to hope and believe against all odds, maybe we can too.

Then Luke has us listen in as Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth,
now pregnant with John the Baptist.
And it's here that Mary burst into a song of radiant resilience.
a song that will become irretrievably embedded in our human consciousness.

Mary Song, Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said:
“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

Who rejoices in a savior?

Not the one who sees them self as the savior of others.

Not the one who prides them self in their own accomplishments.

Not the one who thinks they could or should do it all on their own.

No. That person has no need of a savior.

The one who rejoices in a savior is the one who knows they desperately need to be saved.

Their world had gone crazy: violence, intimidation, oppression, lies and deceit, failure

The facts on the ground are desperate,

and Mary knows the only answer is “God my Savior.”

And her radiant resilient spirit rejoices in the child, Jesus, who is to come.

for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.

We might think that because God is great, he has a natural preference for great people.

There are many people who can wield power effectively.

People who know how to win.

People with strength of personality; money; connection.

People who say, “God, you’ve noticed all that I have to offer, and I’m glad to help.”

Rather, Mary sees her smallness and marvels that God has even noticed her at all.

for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.

If the Mighty One uses a *humble* servant, who gets the credit for the great things?

And the humble servant he uses is protected from *the* greatest enemy of our soul – pride.

Holy, marvelous, brilliant, wise, delightful is his name!

His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

I love this picture of his mercy from New York Pastor Tim Keller:

“We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe,
yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ
than we ever dared hope.”

Most of us have no idea just how much mercy we need.

We have no idea just how broken and flawed we are.

Sure, we have a few, *correctable* problems.

We could never admit it to ourselves or others how broken we really are
for fear we'd never be loved.

At the bottom of *Mary's* radiant resilience is confidence in God's mercy,
which is new every morning.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

Some of you dads may remember arm wrestling with your sons or other young men.

You'd humor them for a while, letting them use two hands,
or put a book under their elbow.

Then you'd pretend they're winning,

but just when they almost have you pinned,

you show them who was still boss and roll them over.

Then everyone has a good laugh.

Think of God arm wrestling

the self-important business executive,

the self-consumed celebrity,

the self-sufficient ordinary man.

But when God is ready Whoosh . . . Only no one's laughing

As Mary proclaims . . .

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

Why despair when liars get away with their deceptions.

Why seethe with anger over how you've been wronged.

Why lose sleep over all the crazy politicians.

Why be Eeyore, the Winnie the pooh character,

who's full of doom and gloom.

Unless, of course, we *want* to be a Zechariah – the pessimistic cynic,
unable to sing the radiant, resilient song of hope.

We have a choice.

We can get all caught up with the facts on the ground, and they're not pretty.

We can watch way too much cable news.

We can listen to way too much gossip.

We can seek to know more than God wants us to know,
and be overwhelmed with that knowledge.

We can so easy to get stuck in the quicksand that sucks us down, down, down . . .

OR, you can step away from the muck

and let Mary's radiant resilient song echo in our ears,

knowing that at his command, the proud are scattered with the flick of his finger.

In a moment, God says, "Enough!" and

"justice will roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

(Amos 5:24),

**He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.**

Mary changes the fundamental question from:

Who has the *power* to rule?

to:

Who has the *moral authority* to rule?

God says it is the humble who have the moral authority to rule
and it is through the humble that he will make his power prevail.

For Isaiah 66:2 says, **"I will look favorably on this kind of person:
one who is humble, submissive in spirit, and who trembles at My word."**

**He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.**

Who does God fill? The hungry.

He passes right by the self-sufficient.

He passes right by the self-important.

He passes right by the self-advancing.

As 1 Cor. 1:27-29 says,

"God has chosen the world's foolish things to shame the wise,
and God has chosen the world's weak things to shame the strong.

Are humble and hungry for God this morning?
Then welcome aboard; expect to be filled.

God can use you and me, this humble church of humble people
if we will but sing Mary's radiant, resilient song of hope in Jesus

He has helped his servant Israel,

Who gets helped? The servant.
If you or I are one of the disenfranchised in our culture,
it's so easy to resent the hand we were dealt.
But what if instead, we started looking at the world
through the eyes of God's great reversal of fortunes?
Really believing that God is FOR whoever the system isn't working for:
He's FOR the least, the last, the servant.

What if instead of being bitter
we could begin singing Mary's radiant resilient song hope –
Jesus is coming into the world.

He remembers to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors."

Mary looks forward and she looks back.
Mary's radiant, resilient song isn't a solo.
It's sung in concert with the song sung down through the generations.
Mary's song is a musical refrain in a much larger orchestral masterpiece.

It's the refrain of Hannah (2 Samuel 2)
'My heart exults in the Lord;
The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
'There is no Holy One like the Lord,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.

It's the refrain of the Psalmist (Psalm 147:6, 5)
The Lord supports the humble,
but he brings the wicked down into the dust.
How great is our Lord! His power is absolute!
His understanding is beyond comprehension.

It's the refrain that reverberates through the ages
and reaches its crescendo in Jesus.
For in the fullness of time, God sent forth his son to redeem us from our sin
that we might be children of God.
Jesus is the radiant resilient hope of the ages

This is the song you and I are invited to sing today.
It's the song of Christmas.
It is the song of Jesus.

I hope you can say with me,
It's my song.

All the facts on the ground may say,
"This is where your story ends."
Mary's song of radiant resilience says,
"No, this is where the story begins."