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First Presbyterian Church  
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Advent 3/Year B  
Luke 1:26-38

*Lord Jesus, we asked for a savior, and then were surprised by the one we received. We asked for deliverance, but were afraid of the form our deliverer assumed. We prayed for healing, only to be shocked by the prescription of the healer. We wanted a word, and then were offended by the words spoken by the Word. We longed for a powerful, impressive god, and what we got was the babe in the manger.*

### **“Don’t Call Her Kiddo”**

The late Peter Gomes, for year Harvard University’s Chaplain, used to tell a funny story about the Protestant Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, who dies and goes to heaven. As the Dean enters the pearly gates, Jesus comes down to greet him and says, “Welcome to heaven, Dean. I know you’ve met my father, but I don’t believe you know my mother. Let me introduce you.”

This may be the only Sunday of the church year Protestants are comfortable talking about Mary. In fact, I think this is the only Sunday of the year we do talk about Mary. Gomes says we Protestants aren’t sure what to do with her because secretly, we think she must be Catholic. But Mary’s not Catholic; and she’s not just for Catholics anymore.

You see, Mary’s in vogue in Protestant circles. In the last 20 years or so, Biblical scholars have taken a closer look at her and have decided they like what they see. And what do they see? Well, they see an example of someone who is in perfect sync with God because she is obedient. She doesn’t question the Angel Gabriel or put up a fight, but instead replies, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Biblical scholars, especially liberation scholars, like her because they see in her a poor young woman who sings about God liberating the poor,

scattering the proud, filling the hungry with good things, sending the rich away empty, and fulfilling the promises made to Abraham.

Other Biblical scholars like her because she is one of only a few women who are written about in the Bible. In case you haven't noticed, women are far under-represented in the Bible. It's significant in Luke that Mary speaks at all because in Matthew she's only talked about; she doesn't even have a voice. But even in Luke women only speak a mere fifteen times.

Luke refers to Mary as "favored" and "blessed". And like the liberation theologians, feminist theologians appreciate that she sings about God setting the oppressed going free since women are still an oppressed group. The weekly news never fails to bring this to light.

But in the past couple of years, some Biblical scholars have begun looking critically at those viewpoints. They're starting to question some of the language Luke uses to describe Mary as well as some long held assumptions about her. And I, for one, find this recent scholarship to be refreshing because I think it is liberating, both for women, men and Mary.

Full disclosure here before we go any further:

1. I have long considered myself a feminist, which for me means I believe in the equality of men *and women*.
2. On my dorm room door in college hung a bumper sticker that said "uppity women unite".
3. I earned a doctorate, and prefer the title "Dr." to "Kiddo". If you don't know what I'm talking about, Google WSJ editorial by Joseph Epstein

So now you know where I'm coming from.

Last Tuesday, as I read once again Mary's Magnificat and the annunciation, there was something about it that bothered me. I don't know, maybe I'd had a bad morning or something, but there was something about it that just bugged me.

“She’s in perfect sync with God,” interpreters say. “She said yes to God’s plan!” And the best of all, “We can be better friends, spouses, mothers, daughters, grandmothers, and neighbors as we say yes to the new thing that God is doing with and within us.”

Really, I thought? Look, I’m all for saying yes to the new thing God is doing, but the implication here is that to be considered good in the eyes of God, you need to always say yes. When in reality, sometimes you need to say no and saying no is the right thing to do. Women in abusive relationships need to say no; girls who are pressured to do things against their will need to say no; and they need to hear more than they do that God is OK with those no’s.

It also troubles me that Mary is, for the most part, revered because she is submissive. And, like so many other women in the Bible, they are famous because of the men they give birth to. Personally, I hope to be known for more than the sons I bear and I hope for the same for my daughters. As an aside, when I told Terry all of this Tuesday night, he told me I am known for more-I’m also known for the husband I have!

And one piece of information I found this week, which I’d never heard before, is that Mary-despite what we’ve been told-wasn’t poor. She came from an upper-class family; many of her relatives were priests. Why then, is it necessary to call her lowly? Or a servant? Is it because Luke wants her to be inferior and helpless?

And here’s something else I came across and had never really considered, but what the Angel Gabriel asked her to do put her in danger. Joseph had every legal right to stone her for getting pregnant out of wedlock. Added to this is the fact that the child she was to bear put her in direct conflict with King Herod and the Roman Empire. King Herod had already killed two of his own children and a wife because he thought they were out to claim his throne, so killing Mary would have been nothing for him. And we have no idea of the hopes and dreams she had for herself. What was she supposed to do now? And who would believe her story?

God coming into Mary's life not only disrupted her life, it put her in great difficulty. Let's not whitewash over that fact and make it into a picture-perfect Christmas card, because it wasn't. Mary's "yes" to the Angel is an act of radical faithfulness. In accepting the Angel's promise, Mary becomes the first to believe the good news of Jesus. She becomes the first disciple, the first proclaimer of Jesus, and the first prophet.

But Mary also comes in a long line of women who are often ignored for their prophetic service. Sarah, the mother of Isaac and Ishmael, Hannah, whose story you heard Carrie read, and Elizabeth, the mother of John—all of them do their part to prepare the way of the Lord, and their preparations and faithfulness are courageous.

Dare we join them in their courage?

Dare we find our courageous voices to stand with women long silenced?

Let's talk about that WSJ op-ed. If you don't know what I'm talking about, in a nutshell the writer, who referred to Dr. Jill Biden as "kiddo", said she should drop the title "Dr" because, in his own words "it sounds and feels fraudulent, not to say a touch comic. Your degree is, I believe, an Ed.D., a doctor of education, earned at the University of Delaware through a dissertation with the unpromising title "Student Retention at the Community College Level: Meeting Students' Needs." A wise man once said that no one should call himself "Dr." unless he has delivered a child. Think about it, Dr. Jill, and forthwith drop the doc."

The editorial page editor defended the op-ed. "Why go to such lengths to highlight a single op-ed on a relatively minor issue?" he [wrote](#) in a letter to readers.

Well, this isn't a relatively minor issue, and frankly, even saying that is offensive. And no, this isn't about media and academic censorship, or cancel culture. The WSJ can choose to print any op-ed it wants, and women and our allies can choose to say "no more!" No one making ourselves small so that someone like Joseph Epstein can feel big.

It's not a minor issue to dismiss someone's accomplishments and call a grown woman "kiddo". It's wrong. It's demeaning. And there's nothing funny about a woman who works hard for her credentials. Countless women have faced the same kind of spiteful malice Mr. Epstein shows for Dr. Biden. Why, I've stood in the sanctuaries of churches I've served and listened to couples tell me they really would love to get married there but they don't want me b/c I'm a woman, and they don't believe in "lady pastors".. So can we bring our minister, they ask. I've been mistaken for the singer at a funeral! And my stories aren't unique.

Furthermore, to say only those who deliver babies should be entitled to the title Dr is also incorrect. As Merriam-Webster dictionary [pointed out on Twitter](#), "doctor" comes from the Latin word for "teacher"; it was scholars and theologians who, back in the 14th century, used the title well before medical practitioners. And if we're only giving out the title Dr. to those who deliver babies, I kindly request my 4 titles be given to me, in addition to the one I earned from McCormick Theological Seminary while pregnant with title number 3. The point is, women get to choose what we're called and what titles we use. I spoke to a woman on Friday who said the title she's proudest of is Mother, and that's what she wants to be known as. Dr. Jill Biden chooses to use her academic title. I choose to use my Dr. title when I sense the situation warrants it. I earned it. Why do I need to defend its use?

The op-ed has encountered the criticism it has because it's yet another example of dismissing a woman and her achievements. Respecting women isn't a progressive value. It's a Christian value. Jesus would never have stood for someone being so dismissive; Lord knows he took to task the disciples for being dismissive of others. And, I do believe he instructed us to treat others as we want to be treated, and I'm guessing the Op-Ed writer would take offense if someone were to be so dismissive of him. His editor certainly took issue with his treatment.

The thing is, women like Mary and her predecessors, many of whom don't even get a name in the Bible let alone a voice, remind us that God came to turn the world upside down.

Dare we raise our voices with them? Do we dare hope that such a world could be? I do, and in those moments of hope I hear my mother, and grandmothers, and all the faithful women who have loved me and care for me and mentored and molded me. I hear women singing #MeToo. I hear cries of joy when glass ceilings are shattered, and mournful sobs when they aren't. And I hear a chorus of faithful women who dare to raise their voice in defiant courage and hope to a world twisted around privilege and power.

Friends, it's no accident that God came to Mary to give birth to the Savior of the World. It says something about God, and what God wants and expects from us, you know. Think about it. The angel appears not to a father, but to a mother. Not in the temple, but in an ordinary, remarkable town. Not to a person of power and privilege, but to a woman. God could have chosen someone else, but God chose Mary.

Could it be that God wants men and women to have equal roles? That, indeed, the good news of Christ's birth will steer us in a new direction. That we don't have to be as we are. That the world doesn't have to be as it is. That, as the Angel Gabriel says, "Nothing will be impossible with God."

I think so.

The annunciation shows us that the primary way God changes the world is through ordinary people like Mary and you and me who choose to say yes. Yes, to being something more than we are; yes to setting the world in a new direction; yes to setting ourselves and our communities on a new course. Mary shows us that we do not have to be trapped by our fears or our histories; that we can be something more. That we, too, can find our courageous voices, thereby allowing God to write the script of our lives.

And I don't know about you, but I'd much rather have God write my script, than some Op-Ed writer.

Amen.

*Most High God, for you nothing is impossible. Through a poor young woman in a small town you gave birth to your realm of endless glory. By*

*your Holy Spirit, fill us with new life and hope and overshadow us with your power and grace so that we, like Mary, might be proclaimers of your word, bearing witness to the promise of it; through Jesus Christ, who is coming to reign, we pray, Amen.*