

“Spark of the Soul”

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Text: Luke 1:46b-55

I have to admit, after growing up in Florida and living in Virginia and Tennessee for the last 15 years, I’m trying to remember how to navigate these short winter days and avoid Seasonal Affective disorder. I know that Danish and Norwegian people are some of the happiest people in the world, and they live with short winter days. So, I’m learning how to do it. And I am trying to cultivate the spark. You’ve all mastered this, I’m sure. But I’m learning that when darkness comes, I should light candles more often, get the fire roaring, and stay cozy under the family quilts. I put Christmas lights in every corner of my living room. And on this Sunday, as we turn to Mary’s story and the Magnificat, I am reminded that the fireplace is not the only place where we nurture a spark. We also have to tend to that spark in our souls.

Mary’s story is told in the first chapter of Luke. I imagine Mary, standing in a field, stretching out her sore back muscles, trying to break up the rocky ground. Mary lives in Nazareth, far away from the capital city of Jerusalem. She is a Jewish woman, and the Roman Empire has taken her people captive.

It is an Empire marked by excess—an excess of riches, food and sex. The Romans would eat until they were engorged, and then they would throw up so that they would eat some more. They were known for wild parties thrown by rulers like Caligula. They enslaved about a third of the people they conquered, and it seems as though Mary was one of them. She describes herself as a “humiliated slave.”

Mary’s family likely migrated to Nazareth for a quieter life, to get away from the forces of Rome. But that left them with fewer resources. People in Nazareth mostly live on the land, which is hard and rocky. The houses are simple caves or dwelling made out of field stones. People from Nazareth speak with accents and everyone looks down on them. The Rabbis see them as people who are not committed to the law, and one disciple asks, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” There is nothing in Mary’s life that would indicate that she’s blessed. As a servant, she tries to stay hidden, out of people’s way. She’s used to caring for the needs of others. People from Nazareth were hungry. They were oppressed. (If you have seen the *Hunger Games*, that was how it worked. The outer districts served the capital.)

In the midst of this, Gabriel the messenger comes and tells Mary two important pieces of information: number one, that she will bear the son of God and number two, that her cousin Elizabeth is also pregnant, even though she’s old. Because nothing is too wonderful for God.

And Mary responds, “Here I am. Let it be according to your Word.”

This moment is important for me, as a feminist in 2019. The words make it consensual. Mary is not a handmaiden, but a woman with agency. She echoes the words of ancient patriarchs, prophets and Kings like Abraham, Samuel and David. “Here I am.”

Meister Eckhart, a medieval philosopher and mystic, also sees this as a crucial moment. He says that in this assent, there is a spark of the soul. Eckhart writes that we flow out of God our Creator. God is perpetually creating us; we live in the mind of God and always being stretched and formed and molded. And at this point in time, **Mary, in her determination, first gives spiritual birth to God, and now God is eternally borne. Every good soul that longs for God, bears God and gives birth to God.**

God gives birth to us. And we give birth to God.

Mary harbors this news alone. And while excited, she trembles in fear. Her very flesh is in danger. Her fiancée, Joseph, is not the father of this child, and she knows that if she is found out, she would be stoned. The men in her village would surround her, forming a human fence so she could not escape. Her neighbors, her teachers, and her friends—they would pick up rocks, and with fury, they would hurl them at her, until her skin bruised and her body crumpled in a mass on the ground. This reality haunts her.

She becomes overwhelmed by the changes in her body and fearful that someone will find out her secret. So, she goes to visit Elizabeth. It’s a treacherous journey to travel from Nazareth to the hillside—about 8 days along a road that is known for its thieves and bandits. People often moved in caravans. I’m not sure how she did it—journeying from one place to the next, nauseous from her pregnancy. Her mind is on her belly and the precious child growing inside of her, but while every thought is consumed by this infant, she cannot speak of him. Until she finally arrives at Elizabeth’s.

Mary shows up at Elizabeth’s doorstep, exhausted from the journey. Completely disheveled. Mary and Elizabeth meet each other. Zechariah may be there too, but as we learned last week, he’s not talking much. The two cousins find themselves pregnant under the most extraordinary circumstances: Elizabeth is too old to have a child, and Mary is too young. Elizabeth prepares the way for Mary. When the two have their reunion, Elizabeth is beginning her third trimester, just gaining back some of her strength and energetically nesting, while Mary is in her first three months, nauseous, weak and needing a lot of rest.

They embrace one another with their swollen bellies and their hopeful eyes, and their babies leap inside of them. The Holy Spirit fills Elizabeth when she sees Mary, this poor young woman, with God knocking about inside of her. Such great joy overwhelmed Mary that she sang out a song, echoing the prophets and the words of Hannah, proclaiming social justice, she shouts out the soaring poetry of the *Magnificat*. And this lowly servant begins to imagine the liberation of her people.

My Soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!
The hungry will be filled. The proud will be scattered. The lowly will be lifted.

That must have been some kind of kick!

After spending some time with Elizabeth, Elizabeth's water breaks, and a swarm of midwives move into Elizabeth's home. They prepare the room and breathe with Elizabeth. They tell stories and sing, trying to get Elizabeth's mind off of the waves of pain that envelop her. And when John is born, they become amazed at his voice, and they lift the tiny infant into the sky as they cry and pass him around.

And Zechariah, John's father begins to speak. And he has also written a song. It's not as good as Mary's though.

Mary returns home. By now, Mary is about six months pregnant. Gabriel has also visited Joseph, Mary's fiancée. And so he hides her, making sure that she is safe from the stones and the angry mobs. And making sure that Mary is cared for in the coming days.

As we go out, let us remember what the season of Advent is all about. It is a longing for God. And as Eckhart says, "Every good soul that longs for God, bears God and gives birth to God." That is our spark. The moment when we can say to God, "We're here. We are open to all the ways that you will liberate us. And we are open to all the ways that you will make us liberators."

In this season, may we nurture our spark. May we all learn to bear God.

To the glory of God our Creator, God our Liberator, and God our Sustainer. Amen