

“Adolescent Faith”
Luke 1:45-55
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3rd Sunday in Advent
December 13, 2015

Ah to be a teenager again. To be able to stay up past 10:30 and sleep in until 12 o'clock without any artificial assistance. To adapt to every new technological innovation instead of grumbling about another change. To have your body working properly with no aches or pains and plenty of delicious carbohydrates that don't end up in all the wrong places. To have the freedom to think that it's a good idea to try to surf down stairs on a sled, or get pulled behind a car with a rope on a rolling desk chair, or snow mobile across a lightly frozen lake, all videotaped so your stupidity can be celebrated nationwide. To let your heart lead you places adults are too reticent to tread. To value your friendships more than your things. To march and protest without thinking too much about your abstract future. To look at the world as the place of limitless possibility instead of narrowed dreams. Ah, to be a teenager again.

Of course there's a cost to *not having* a fully developed brain as yours truly who as an adolescent once tried to wire up a light switch to an electrical outlet can tell you. Fully developed brains think of all the good reasons why risk should be avoided, managed, contained. That's why young-brained teenagers are normally watched over by full-developed-brained adults. We want to keep our kids safe. We want them to make good choices and protect them when they don't.

But a “fully developed” brain is overrated. At least, it seems overrated for God. Why else would God keep choosing young people like David and Samuel, like Rachel and Ruth, like Mary to take on new assignments. Look at this whole Virgin Mary thing from God's perspective. Tell any woman with a fully developed brain in a patriarchal culture that she is about to have a baby out of wedlock, a baby that does not belong to her fiancé, and what kind of a reaction would you get. Fear? Shame? Anger? Despair? We hear nothing like that from Mary. God has done wonderful things for me, she says. God has looked with favor on me.

Of course, it's possible that Mary said nothing of the sort. The Bible itself raises this possibility in footnote fine print. “Other ancient authorities read Elizabeth,” it says, meaning that some other Greek manuscripts put these words of praise in the mouth of Elizabeth, not Mary. Apparently the early church had a hard time believing that young Mary would be celebrating news she was pregnant. Elizabeth, yes - a married woman who had been barren celebrating her reversal of fortune, like so many women of the Bible before her. Like Sarah and Rachel and Hannah. They all prayed for children, hoped for children, waited for children, before God looked with favor on each of them and gave them what they asked for. Of course, they'd offer a prayer of gratitude. But Mary? An unwed teenage mother whose pregnancy put her at greater risk?

It's hard to believe that she could have spoken these words given her precarious situation. It's hard to believe that she could thank God for what any adult

would clearly see as misfortune. It's hard to believe that she could raise words of praise and gratitude for what any adult could clearly see as her narrowed future. It's hard to believe that she could claim that all generations would call her blessed when any adult would say she had been cursed. It's hard to believe when your adult brain, so accustomed to narrowing risk, to playing it safe, to celebrating predictably good news, kicks in.

But God is playing it any way but safe. The world is being turned upside down. Those who are lowly, (some scholars say "shamed"), are being lifted up. God is reversing the fortunes of those who have been on the bottom for so long they can hardly imagine anything different. God is at work in ways that perhaps only the adventure-prone adolescent brain can entertain.

Of course, anyone who looks closely at the story will immediately notice that Mary has several advantages over most of us. She's got a cousin, Elizabeth, who doesn't act like her brain is any more developed than Mary's. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb," she says, which is not at all what any of my aging cousins would have said to me if I was a teenaged girl who believed that the Holy Spirit had gotten me pregnant. Elizabeth's a lot more open to seeing the good in what is otherwise troubling news.

And Mary has an angel who comes and tells her that what is happening to her is, in fact a blessing. She has a angel who comes to make it clear that what looks like a curse is actually a blessing, what looks like misfortunate is actually good news. Mary's got an interpreter that we don't have. Someone to help her see the good in what is otherwise troubling news.

It's that last bit of help that leaves me troubled that maybe Mary's situation can't really be used to inform mine. I don't have winged seraphs telling me when troubling news is nothing more than that, or when it's actually a blessing. But the word angel just means messenger. Spokespeople for God. Maybe God does send those kinds of messengers but people with fully developed brains have a harder time listening to them when they come. Maybe risk-welcoming people like David and Samuel, like Ruth and Mary are better able to recognize messengers from God when they arrive. Maybe to see the good in what is otherwise troubling news, you've got to be able to meet the world with the brain of an adolescent like Elizabeth who despite her age, meets the world with an openness to adventure, an openness to the intrusion of God in places where others only see hopelessness.

Because the good news that Mary sings to the world is hardly believable. The proud have been scattered, the powerful brought down from their thrones, the hungry filled with good things, and those who are rich sent away empty. To believe that God was acting like that you'd have to be open to an angel helping you to find the good in what is otherwise troubling news. To believe that God is bringing justice into our world at this time in history you'd have to find it possible to sing praises to God when others think God is already dead. To believe that God is lifting up the poor and the oppressed and bringing down those who think they are on the top of the world, you'd have find it possible for God to meet you in ways and places where others see only the status quo.

The news that God brings is hardly believable. On Wednesday I begrudgingly went to the meeting of the Health Services Cost Review Commission. It was my

second time. Following the unrest, Johns Hopkins led a group of hospitals who proposed a plan to create 1000 community health worker jobs, targeting our most distressed communities. To fund the jobs, the hospitals proposed a slight increase in the hospital reimbursement rates. A quarter for every hundred dollars of reimbursement. But the Care First CEO opposed the deal and wouldn't meet to discuss alternatives. And the staff of the Commission thought it was an interesting plan but a little too aggressive for their mandate. They wanted to play it safe. It looked unlikely that the plan would go forward.

I had prepared our team not to expect a favorable outcome. It was unlikely that a group of mostly unemployed or just recently employed ex-offenders alongside some church folk and their clergy could overcome opposition from an insurance company sitting on a billion dollars of reserves. It just wasn't believable. "I've been moved by the stories," one commissioner began. I leaned over to a leader and finished the commissioner's sentence in a whisper, "I've been moved by the stories, BUT I'm not going to do anything to change them."

Then an amazing thing happened. A commissioner spoke up and said, "I know the staff doesn't think we should be aggressive, but these are unprecedented times." Another added, "History shows that in times of crisis, nothing changes without bold leadership." "I know we can't fix everything," one commissioner said "but we can do something, and we should do something." Pretty soon a compromise was being offered. The rate would be adjusted less than requested and hospitals would be asked to pay more, but at the end of the day 375 new living wage jobs would be made a possibility for residents of Baltimore's most distressed neighborhoods. Despite my lack of faith, this was going to happen. My mind wandered to Mary's song – "God's mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." I watched the reporters scribbling furiously to get down this sudden change of heart. "I whispered to the reporter sitting next to me, 'I think you just made the front page!'" "You have shown strength with your arm, O God; you have scattered the proud in their conceit." I looked over and saw the Care First spokesperson texting furiously probably to his boss who had argued by letter that he had no responsibility in this matter. "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and raised the lowly to high places; You have filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." The commissioners took a vote – it was unanimous. "God has come to the aid of Israel, your servant, mindful of your mercy, according to the promise you made to our ancestors, to Sarah and Abraham and their descendants forever."

God is at work turning the world upside down, but it's hard to entertain that possibility with a mature, risk limiting brain. It's hard to hear words from God's messengers when you've already decided they don't exist. You need the gift of a teenage brain, open to possibilities, able to entertain possibilities, to recognize the good that can come out of troubling news. To recognize God's messengers when they come to us promising change that evens the scales, that brings hope where there was none, that promises joy to the world through the Lord who has and is to come.