

Sunday 20 December 2015 Advent 4

Luke 1:39–55

Dare we Imagine God's Face?

First Mennonite Church, Saskatoon

Our gospel story is almost embarrassingly human, specific, earthy, and gynecological. It is a story about two pregnant women, one young and the other old. Unlike some of the stories about women in the Gospels, these two women are identified. Where they live is noted and named.

What makes this story so compelling, so intriguing is how these two women see their two unborn babies being part of God's plan to save the world. And my question is, how? How did they know their unborn babies were part of God's plan?

This is such an ordinary story. There is Elizabeth who was married to a priest named Zechariah.

Luke says both Elizabeth and Zechariah were righteous (Luke 1:6-7) and lived the way of the Lord. Both were getting on in years, which is another way of saying, they were getting old. Though they were righteous and living in the way of the Lord, this aging couple didn't have any children. In that day and age, it was the woman's fault for not becoming pregnant, even though there was at least a 50% chance it was Zechariah's problem. Being barren brought shame upon her family. Elizabeth was a disgrace in her community.

By contrast, Mary was young, engaged but not married, and pregnant. She became pregnant by the Holy Spirit, not by her fiancé, Joseph. We have names for such babies. Thankfully, I don't hear this term anymore, though we used to call such babies illegitimate. That is a sad term for anybody, illegitimate, much less the very Son of God.

Two women—one older and barren and one young, engaged but not married. Both are pregnant. Both see their two unborn babies being part of God's plan to save the world.

How did they know? Of course, Mary knew because the angel Gabriel told her she had found favour with God and would bear a child named Jesus. Elizabeth confirmed Mary's

child was God's chosen because her baby, John, jumped in her womb, not once but twice. That's how they knew.

But surely, you don't believe everything you hear, see, or feel. I certainly don't. I've received many phone calls from people claiming to be from the CRA. They accuse me of being a tax fraud, and that I need to pay \$5K by the end of the week. To make it right, they want me to transfer money to a bank account they provide. I just hang up. I've learned not to answer phone numbers I don't recognize. I hope you do too!

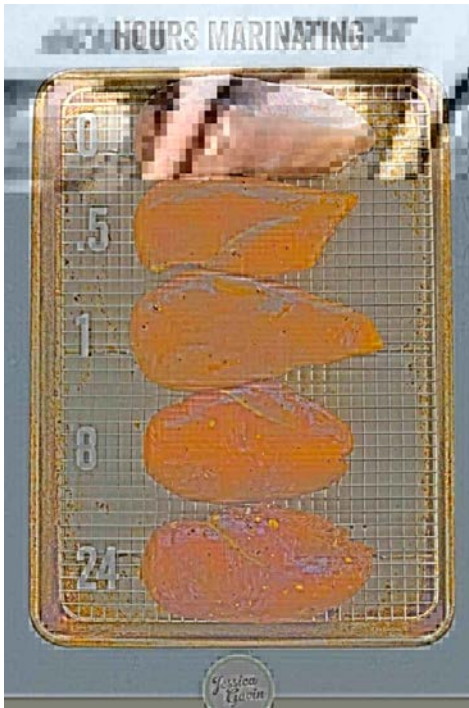
So, how did they know their babies were part of God's plan to save the world? I'll give you a hint. It has a lot to do with imagination.

Back in 1985, I went on a 3-year voluntarily service assignment to Taiwan. It was the first time for me to travel to a place vastly different than what I knew. As this was years before the internet, any information I knew of Taiwan was through a couple of books and the orientation I received before going.

Let me tell you, everything in Taiwan was different. The people, language, food, how people shopped, the religion, the air—even Taiwan's soil was different! It was red! Not black the way it should be. Even though I knew I was on the other side of this world, I felt many, many times that I stepped onto a completely different one, a new planet with its own rules and its own ways of doing things. All my assumptions about how to live, speak, listen, how to relate to people were tossed out the window. I felt like a fish out of water.



Though Mary and Elizabeth lived in the culture of the 1st century, both were also rooted deeply in the soil of the Hebrew scriptures, steeped in the story of their peoples' relationship with God. Because of this they dared to imagine a world, a parallel universe, if you will, where God was active, where possibilities existed for God to do something new.



Let me illustrate with a cooking example. One way of enhancing the flavour, introducing moisture, and changing the texture of meat is through the process of marinating. A typical marinade is made up of three essential components: **an acid** (such as vinegar, wine, or citrus), **an oil** (such as olive oil or sesame oil), and a **flavouring agent** (such as herbs and spices). These elements work together to transform the taste and texture of your dish.¹

In the same way, Mary and Elizabeth had marinated themselves in the biblical story, which transformed how they saw the world. God's story allowed a different imagination for what is real, desirable, and possible to seep through their skin and deep down into their DNA. It allowed them to see, imagine God doing something

new.

Listen to some of the words of Mary's Magnificat: With all my heart I glorify.... God my saviour.... He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.... just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever.

Where is God? Mary can imagine God's world. She can imagine a time when God will come to restore peace, execute justice, bring about a new heaven and a new earth. Paul, in Ephesians 1:9-10 provides a big picture of what God is doing through the person of Jesus. And it's bringing all the broken pieces shattered by a world of sin back together again. It's all about bringing peace to a violent world. It's about executing justice in a world that so unjust. It's the reconciliation of all things. God is on a mission to bring all things back together.

And young, poor Mary saw that. Older adults often look at young people critically. They think, "they know it all." To those who aren't young, let me remind you of a truth: do not assume spending decades in the church brings about spiritually maturity. A person can spend decades in the church and still see the world as the Pharisees did. The

¹ <https://www.chicken.ca/chicken-school/the-makings-of-a-marinade/>

Pharisees spent their lives in the Temple and synagogue. But we know from the Gospels, the law-and-order view of the Pharisees wasn't the highest form of spirituality, according to Jesus.

When I read the Magnificat, I'm reminded of my privilege position in society. I'm well-fed. I'm warm and feel quite safe. I'm also white, middle class, and male. Globally, I'm very rich and privileged. Mary was none of these things. I was born into the winning side of almost every conceivable social power dynamic: a true benefactor of empire. Mary was born into poverty, living under Roman occupation, but immersed, saturated in the story of scripture.

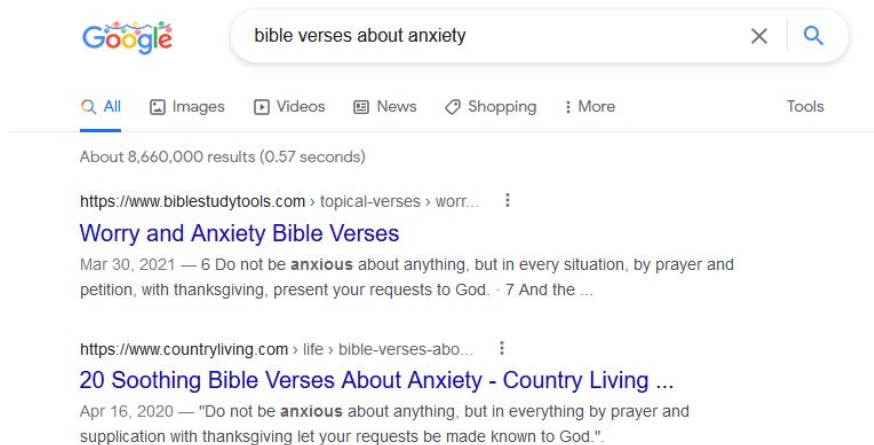
The Magnificat is a dangerous song. It imagines God's world. When we pray, "Your kingdom come ...", we not only pray it but try and live into God's future that's coming but not yet here.

Are we able to imagine what Mary imagined?

Yes. But...sadly, many western Christians today no longer read their Bibles or even pray. This includes many pastors. Surveys on the subject say people have stopped because they don't get anything out of the Bible.

Too often people don't get anything out of it because they read the Bible looking for a quick takeaway point. I call this way of reading the Bible the vending machine approach. With a vending machine you select the type of food or drink you want, plug in your money, and presto, the machine gives you what you want. When people feel depressed, angry, anxious, or scared, they will often look for specific passages of scripture they

hope will speak to their most pressing need. These days it's so easy to Google your question and immediately find websites listing Bible verses that may give you what you need. My search on anxiety produced over 8 million results! One could get anxious at how much time it would take to get through all these results!



What often happens is that these specific verses don't give us what we need. When a vending machine doesn't give us what we want we may give it a shake, but if nothing happens, then we assume the machine doesn't work. If the Bible doesn't give us that quick takeaway point we want, we assume it doesn't work and abandon the effort.

The point of Scripture isn't to make us feel better, although there are times it will do that. Part of what scripture does is to shape an **alternative imagination** for the God of possibilities in the world. Reading and meditating on a story or poem in scripture over time shapes our imagination of a world where God is active, where God can and does do new things.

Everyday, we are being shaped and influenced in big and small ways. Just think about the hundreds of advertisements we watch on TV, see in newspapers and magazines, see and read on Warman Road billboards. Think about all the TV shows you watch daily or weekly, the Netflix shows, the YouTube videos. All these things shape you. Think about all these as mini sermons. They shape your imagination of what is real, desirable, and possible. They soak into our skin and lodge themselves deep into our DNA. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying advertisements and TV shows are bad or evil. I'm telling you this so that you are aware. These things shape our imaginations. They shape how we see.

Scripture reveals a profoundly different view of reality, a different world. In scripture we encounter a view of the world where God is active. In scripture we see a world telling us what is real, is most desirable, and possible. And it's profoundly different from the world we spend so much of our time during the week.

For much of the week, we are being shaped by the imaginations of corporations, capitalism, consumerism, individualism, and then come to church for about an hour a week to hear about a profoundly different world of God. There are 168 hours in a week. If we only spend one hour per week in church and the rest of the time out there in the world, which imagination do you think will dominate and control us? Is it any wonder the church is so polarized today!

Mary and Elizabeth, however, could imagine God doing something new because they were saturated in a different view of the world.

Being marinated in scripture is NOT about getting that one takeaway point each day, but it's allowing yourself over time to be shaped by a different story with a different imagination of what is real, desirable, and possible.

Imagining God doing something new gives us a fresh vision of the world. We can get out into the world and begin to see God's possibilities there. It's a life-long process of transformation where we allow God's Spirit to shape us in a way that is different from the hundreds of mini-sermons we see each day in the form of advertisements. It moves us away from our culture's need for a quick fix.

In the Hebrew Bible there are around 613 laws, give or take. As Christians, we are part of the new covenant with Jesus. We have only one law or command, and that is the law of love: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself (Luke 10:27). Our one command is to love God and neighbour. Our Anabaptist forebearers called this, the rule of Christ. When we go out into the world, there is one thing we need to ask in every situation we find ourselves in. We must ask, what does it mean to love in this relationship? To love in this or that situation?

We are called to have the mind of Christ. The Holy Spirit is shaping us as we walk, as we live, as we engage with people and the world. When we are aware of this we can be alert to the Spirit of God. The central question for each of us is, what is love asking us in a particular situation.

Paul writes many things in the Epistles. Basically, what he's doing is thinking through with the early Christians about the rule of Christ. What does it mean to love as Christ loved when you gather for a community meal, eat meat offered to idols, or deal with an irritable church member? What does love mean in this situation or in that one?

This is not a cheap question. There are lots of things we do and say in the name of love that are very destructive to people. We need to be marinated, trained with the teachings of Jesus to really understand what the parameters of love are.

Practically what does it look like in our daily life? I try to start each day with a spiritual practice of prayer. During this time, I don't just talk, but listen too. I also try to think through my day in the presence of God. I imagine each activity, each meeting, the people I will meet and talk to, and then imagine how I will implement the law of love. I try to prepare myself without knowing specific answers.

We are all quite tired of the Pandemic. Extroverts find it hard not to gather in large groups, be with lots of different people for meals and visits. Perhaps, one could look at the increased time alone as an opportunity to foster our relationship with God, hone

our ability to see and imagine God's world by taking the alone time afforded us to be quiet in the presence of God, to listen quietly for God to speak to us.

Maybe, the next time you pray, ask yourself, how will I show up at my next meeting, my next class, the next game, or the next dinner with the spirit of love, with the mind of Christ? What are some of the obstacles that might obstruct my attempts at implementing the law of love? Will it be my fears that will get in the way? Will it be my social awkwardness? My Pride? My Ego? Try to prepare yourself without knowing the answer.

We can't know each situation, can't possibly know who we will encounter, can't know the answer ahead of time, but can allow ourselves to be shaped by God's Spirit. Our job is to keep the channel open between us and God so that the Spirit of God can do what God does, which is transform us and the entire Cosmos!

In John's gospel, we are told a story about Jesus, eager to tell the disciples about what God was up to in the world but couldn't because they **weren't ready** (John 16:12). The disciples who spent three years with Jesus, walking beside him, listening to his teachings, witnessing his mighty acts weren't ready. They couldn't imagine. They couldn't see.

In today's story, we have an old barren woman and young, pregnant Mary. Both could imagine. Both could see! Both were spiritually prepared. Young Mary dared to imagine God coming into the world because she had marinated her spirit in God's story and listened to God in prayer.

Go and do likewise, friends! Amen