

“We Can do Hard Things”¹

December 14th, 2014

Advent 3B

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and Luke 1:26-38

This sermon was preached by Pr. Sarah Semmler Smith at Trinity Lutheran in Eau Claire, WI.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace from the one who was and is and is yet to come, Jesus, God with us, Emmanuel.

The scripture readings from Isaiah and Luke this morning span centuries of time, both in content and the dates they were written. As I meditated on these texts this week, they brought me to another decade altogether. Late February 1999. Thursday night. 8 seconds to go in the subsection AA girls’ basketball final. We were up by 2 points and the other team had called time out. Coach Drier was giving us the game plan on his marker board. The parents and fans were on their feet in anticipation. The adrenaline in the room caused an audible buzz. The thought in my pony-tailed, teenaged head right then? “*Don’t put me in coach, don’t put me in. Please don’t put me in.*” In the heated situation, I was more than happy being “the encourager.” I’d get my pom-poms out. I’d warm that bench to a toasty glow, and merrily. But then as the buzzer buzzed, I heard coach Drier say, “Erin¹, Mackenzie², Josie⁵ Carrie⁴, Sarah at the three-- get in the game.

I don’t remember how that subsection final ended. Honestly. I’m sure the other team fouled us a few times. Somebody went to the free throw line for one on ones. We probably won. But see, that’s not what I recall clearly all these years later. The moment I remember was a realization: for all the feelings of invincibility and front of confidence I put on at 16—truly difficult situations, intimidated even *terrified* me. And I wondered what that meant about me as a person.

Maybe such feelings are why we call some people heroes, right? People we can admire without apology because they do hard things *Extraordinary* people: like "Louie" Zamperini POW and plane crash survivor. And ordinary people- parents of a child diagnosed with cancer, bravely facing decisions in a situation that is every parent’s greatest fear.

We admire these people who are thrust into a situation and rise to it. And equally so, we admire another other set of crazy people who *volunteer* to go to where the epidemic is. Say *yes* without being asked. Who in the last seconds of the potentially season-ending game say, “Put me in coach--- and give me the ball.”

These are the people that when the going gets tough—they get going. They’re the ones we aspire to be like, of whom we say, “I’m not sure I could do what they have done.”

After reading and re-reading this somewhat familiar passage from Luke, it dawned on me that we were dealing with one kind of hero or another. Mary is a surprising antagonist. She’s a she. A teenager. From the wrong side of the tracks. She does have the prospect of a marriage of humble means on the horizon. Then this messenger shows up—like an alien, out of nowhere. And gives her the news; *the news* that perhaps most teenage girls since they learned of the birds and bees

¹ Language of title adapted from Glennon Doyle Melton’s *Carry on, Warrior: The power of Embracing your messy, beautiful life.*”

dreaded receiving at an inopportune point in life. “A baby? How can this be?” she says. In Mary’s case, we know there were some logistics lacking for this to be a rational possibility. But the angel says, “Nothing will be impossible with God.” What teenage girl doesn’t want to hear that God is bending the nature of reality and has chosen their womb as the setting? As if to put the cherry on the impossible, the angel tells Mary that her elder cousin Elizabeth—who was barren-- was now pregnant, and already in her 5th month. That’s a lot to take in.

I like to image there was a space between the lines of the text, of deliberation, disbelief, confusion, then conviction. Was it 10 seconds, a 10 minute pause? Before the young heroine, Mary, emerges. Without so much to go on beyond long ago prophecy and gut instinct--she makes a leap of faith, and about the wholly crazy situation before her, she says to the angel, “Let it be to me as you have said. I’m the Lord’s servant.”

Mary seems, at first glance, to be the kind of hero who is thrust into a situation, and rises to it. (Well done Mary!) But I wonder—assuming that she was in fact not a puppet but a free individual like you and me—I wonder: What if Mary had said no? What if she said, I prefer to sit this one out. Would God have come through another? Would God have come another way? Would we not be here in this place in the name of her son?

Mary said yes. That makes her also the kind of hero who volunteers. An example of a disciple. Of faith. This nobody girl from long ago is someone who showed us in her willingness to trust God, that “we can do hard things” and someone who we should perhaps seek to emulate.

For there are plenty of hard things to do, today. In your life. Among our society. For the people God loves. Long ago, the writer of Isaiah spoke about a servant prophet, anointed by God to: *bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners...*

And our contextual reading of these words reminds us that this prophet would have originally been speaking to people coming home from hardest of situations, exile, forced now to rebuild their lives from rubble. What good news for them is this text. What a hero such a prophet who proclaimed it.

But then we turn on the news, and are reminded that oppressed, brokenhearted, captive, prisoners are still here. In case any of us are guilty of living in a bubble, or even turning a blind eye—you can’t miss people laying down in the interstate in Minneapolis, taking to the streets in cities throughout the country; creating a hash tag to remind us that their lives matter. As far as we think we may have ‘progressed’ since 1st or the 19th Century, in 2014 we are still in need of such good news, there is yet far to go, tough social and political situations to face down for the sake of God’s dream for us.

Jesus knew there was work to be done when he used these same lines from Isaiah for his context and added, “These words have been fulfilled in your presence.” Our temptation for our context might be to take out our prayer pom-poms, asking, “*Jesus*, in the spirit of Christmas make things right, right now. Asking *him* to fix the mess of our systems, praying *he* would find the way forward in this and other complex situations of history, justice, race, and our own relationships.

Please Jesus, we might say-- if you are the anointed, *do* what you have done for peace, in this time and space, in our societies, among this community, in our homes.

I don't know how he would respond to such prayers. But, I get an image come to mind of a small whiteboard being taken out a plan drawn up, in which he's not the star player. And Christ's voice, calling each of our names, one by one—Esther, John, Ann, Lloyd, Adison, Timothy-- get in the game: Set the oppressed free; bind up the broken hearted. Release the captives. Proclaim the year of the Lord.

You can do hard things. Why else would I have gifted you with all that you are and can do. *Nothing is impossible with God* the angels said to Mary on that night long ago.

With God. Isn't that what we are getting ready to celebrate. Emmanuel.

Let us pray: Lord, help us to be brave. Make us instruments of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. We pray in the name of your son, who has the power to make ordinary heroes of us all, Christ Jesus our Lord. –Amen