

4 Advent 2020

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour; *
for he has looked with favour on his lowly servant.

Does God still speak to us? You bet she does.

Writer and Author, Meg Bucher wrote about 10 ways that God speaks to us today.

1. Through Prayer: David prayed, "Bend down, O Lord, and hear my prayer; answer me, for I need your help" (Psalm 86:1). Prayer is not just a one-way conversation.

2. Scripture: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant to God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

God continually speaks to us through His word.

3. The Holy Spirit: God continues to speak to us today through the Holy Spirit. Dwight L. Moody said:

"There is not a better evangelist in the world than the Holy Spirit."

4. Jesus: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God". Do you want to hear God speaking? Listen to Jesus.

5. God speaks to us through the Church: "All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27). God speaks to us **as church**, not just in church. **We are the church.**

6. People: "They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (Acts 2:42-43). God speaks to us through others.

7. Creation: God certainly speaks to us through all of creation. God is present as one walks along a nature trail or standing in a river and throwing out a fishing line.

Watching a deer springing through the field or while standing on a mountain top.

8. Talents: We all have talents even if we do not think so. They are God-given and He speaks to us through them. Our response is to use them to the best of our abilities.

9. Worship: In our context, as Christians, we worship God in a way that opens our hearts to God's response.

10. Social Media: This venue really changed for many of us this year. God is able to speak to us through many online worship services, Bible studies, podcasts, and coffee hour discussions.

God speaks to us in a myriad of ways, but often not as directly as we would like. This is not surprising. We have questions and concerns, and we want to know what to do next. We have lost a loved one or experienced some sort of trauma, and we want to know why. We are surprised by an unexpected development and we want answers.

I am guessing that Mary, even as devoted as she was to God, was **not** expecting such a direct communication from the Almighty. And I am pretty darn sure that the message she received brought up a lot more questions than were answered.

Out of the entire three-year cycle of Lectionary scripture readings, we only hear Gabriel's message to Mary, on one Sunday. Which is why it makes sense to talk about it this morning. Luke tells us that the messenger is none other than the Angel Gabriel. I have to wonder if Mary knew Gabriel was an angel or not. Was there a shimmering presence with a disembodied voice? Did Gabriel appear to her as a person? We don't know. We know that Gabriel appears in other parts of Scripture. In Daniel Ch 9 we read:

“while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice. 22 He instructed me and said to me, “Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. 23 As soon as you began to pray, a word went out, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed.”

Earlier in Luke Ch 1, an angel speaks to Zechariah: “The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

Gabriel’s Name Means “God is Great”. But despite being a powerful messenger from God, this passage is not about Gabriel. It is about Mary.

It is surprising to me that this story is so familiar even though most of us only hear it every three years. So, I took the time to read various commentaries about it. The other thing that I did which I have not ever done before, was to look at commentaries written by women. That always seems to shake things up a little, in a good way. As we know, Mary would have been 12 -to 13 years old at the time of the visitation. This was a common age for family-arranged marriages. One reason for this young age, was that the Father of the bride could reassure the groom that the bride was indeed a virgin. Mary’s virginity is an important part of this story.

Elizabeth Johnson’s book; “Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints” covers more than we could possibly discuss here today, as it is complex and 400 pages long. But she makes the point that a lot of what we know about Mary comes from a male perspective. This makes it hard for many women to relate to her. The

Annunciation story is not that long but I am amazed about the volumes of study that have been written about it. It is long overdue, for us to listen to female interpretations of this story.

I will give only one example that Elizabeth mentions. She talks about a women's prayer group in South Africa. They would get together and pray the litany of Loreto which is a 'traditional compendium of Mary's praises'. After much discussion, the prayer group decided that two of the praises should be left out. "Mother Inviolate and Mother undefiled". Their reasoning was, that if Mary was an undefiled mother because she conceived without having sex, they must be defiled because they had sex. This did not resonate with them. They felt that in their experience, loving their husbands and having children was a source of joy and a blessing from God. This in no way defiled them in their life-view.

Obviously, not everyone agrees with Ms. Johnson, and honestly, not all women agree. But it does make a point, that for too long, women's voices have been silenced with scripture interpretation in general. Also, when it comes to making the story of Mary their own.

I think that Mary was far from being weak and passive. Meekness does not equal weakness. Meekness is defined as an attribute of human nature and behavior. It has been defined several ways: righteous, humble, teachable, and patient under suffering, willing to follow gospel teachings; an attribute of a true disciple. (Wikipedia)

Mary had a strong Jewish upbringing. She does not come across as being panicked by Gabriel's presence. She obviously felt sure that he was speaking for God and she listened. I can only imagine the questions that were running through her mind. We know that the first thing she did was to run to see her cousin Elizabeth. I admit that I

was clueless about considering why she did this. The assumptions that I made were that she was not too excited to share her good news with her parents and certainly not with Joseph. The other way I discovered that I could look at this, was that Mary knew enough to realize that Elizabeth could relate to what she was going through despite the age difference. They could talk to each other about the miracles taking place. They could share their joy with each other. Now this part does not come from my wisdom and God did not share this with me. I am told that woman who are pregnant share a close bond with others who are pregnant. Mary and Elizabeth could bond through shared experience. Probably why Mary stayed for three months. Yes, she would still have to return home and face Joseph and her family. That would take great courage. But she knew that she was right with God and had a prophetic mission to complete. She was a prophet as we see in the Magnificat. Many of us are feeling lost right now and searching for the direction God is pointing us to. The Pandemic threw us all for a loop and changed a lot of plans. Futures become murky and many suffered personal and family trauma. Oh how we wish that we had Gabriel sitting in front of us letting each of us know what God wants us to do. Mary did not know where her future was headed either. She was taking one day at a time and she trusted in God. She knew that whatever her future held, God would never abandon her. And I can reassure each of you that God will never abandon us either. Place your trust in God and listen for her voice.

Amen