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December 23, 2018
The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:39-55
Micah 5:2-5a
Psalm 80:1-7
Hebrews 10:5-10

What if Mary procrastinated?

I mean...what if the opening words to our Gospel weren't...In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country...But instead the text read...In those days Mary had a lot to do. She knew she should go see Elizabeth but thought it could wait until another day, until she had more time, until she got her to-do list down to a more manageable size. She had been wanting to fit in some "me-time" as well and traveling to see Elizabeth wasn't on her agenda. And this baby, well, she would tell Elizabeth about it eventually, maybe send a message by way of someone traveling that direction. After all, she thought, she would get around to telling folks about this baby one day.

It kind of takes the punch out of the story, doesn't it? If Mary were lackluster in her emotions, if she had been reluctant to visit Elizabeth, if she had made excuses when she said, Here I am Lord...but just not yet.

Because to celebrate, we have to participate. We have to get involved as though it's the most important thing we get to do. That's what happens when something is really important to you, right? You can't wait to get involved.

Yet procrastination is in our DNA. Even Jesus later in his ministry confronted a few procrastinators when in Luke 9 he tells a man to follow him and the man replies, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus scolds him and says, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Jesus tries again with another man who responds... "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family."

I can only imagine Jesus' frustration when faced with those procrastinators. To be calling these individuals forth to something really important only to be met with excuses and delays.

Yet, we can't imagine those same excuses and delays coming from Mary, can we? And, thank goodness they don't. Her quick resolve, her adamant determination to go and visit Elizabeth gives us confidence that something important is happening, something worth our attention. Something good is in our midst and Mary's enthusiasm and bold action set the stage for what it means to not only believe but to follow, to not only celebrate but to participate.

And Mary has some strong words for what it means to participate. Not only does she participate but she magnifies the blessings that have been bestowed upon her. She wants to make them bigger and more impactful. Not only does she magnify and rejoice in her own blessing but she compels God to bless others. God, show them mercy. Strengthen them. Lift them up. Feed them. This is Mary's way of celebrating and participating. Her words aren't just

suggestions or meek requests. They are bold demands of God. And notice that Mary doesn't stop there – with the good things she wants God to do. She also calls upon God to do the difficult things as well. She calls on God to right the wrongs in her midst...to scatter the proud and bring down the powerful and send the rich away.

Her participation in this celebration is nothing less than a radical reordering of the world. And when someone is that ready to act, you take notice. You want to follow. That's the mark of an effective leader.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes her response in these verses from Luke this way: *"It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings.... This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind."*

That's celebration. And Mary doesn't hesitate to stand up and call out what needs to be done! This young girl, dealing with the unexpected, the disorienting, the inconvenient, doesn't make one single excuse. Her lack of procrastination is humbling.

So, I began thinking about what we can learn from Mary this Christmas. What would it mean to really celebrate the Good News of Christ coming into the world? The kind of celebration that calls us to get involved, to boldly go forth with joy when God calls? To stop making excuses and put our faith into high gear?

Here are the lessons I think we should hold on to.

- 1) There is never a perfect time to do something. I am certain that giving birth to Jesus was not in Mary's plan and if it had been, she surely wouldn't have chosen to have a baby as an unmarried teenage girl. Yet, life doesn't always turn out as we had planned. More often than not, we have to be ready when given the chance to act. We have to be ready to put down the things we thought were so important and take up the things that truly matter. And, no, there will be no perfect time but there will be the right time.
- 2) God's blessing should never stop with just ourselves. God's blessings call us forward to claim those blessings for others – even when it seems implausible. Because even the smallest, humblest voice can make a difference. Mary shows us that our ability to speak up and act is powerfully sustained by the strength bestowed upon us by God. Without God, we might fall back on our excuses, our doubts, and our fears. But with God, we can stand with the powerless and support the suffering and feed the hungry. With God, we can speak out against injustice and advocate for the wellbeing of all of God's children. God's blessings should never stop with just ourselves.
- 3) Celebration requires participation. And that participation starts today! It starts today because remember like Mary, this is too good not to share and when something is this

wonderful, we don't want to make excuses or put things off to another day. We want to get involved. If we really believe that God is in the midst of all of this...if we really believe that Jesus came into this world to give us unconditional hope and redeeming love, there is nothing that can keep us from celebrating such an amazing gift. Like Mary, we would not be able to wait another minute to stand up and say...here I am, Lord. I'm ready now. I'm ready to participate because this is worth celebrating.

What would it mean to embody Mary's example of celebration in your life?

When we think of those mentors and leaders we like to emulate, we don't point to the ones who "sort of" like what they do or "kind of" show up when it's convenient. No. Instead, we gravitate to those people who we know believe in what they are doing, who commit their time and their energy to making a difference in this world. Whose enthusiasm and dedication point to something far greater than themselves. I think most of us would agree, it's those people who teach us who we can be.

Today, I want you to think about the people who have shown you what it means to not only celebrate but to participate. Who showed you what it means to boldly share God's blessings with others, not just when it's convenient but because it is joyful. And finally, I want you to consider how you can be that same example for someone else.

What if we all celebrated like Mary?

Amen.