

## **“Sign of Love”**

*A sermon preached on Luke 1:39-55 by Emily Hull McGee  
on December 23, 2018 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

We’ve talked this Advent season about signs, about God’s tendency to reveal good news through a handful of signals and indicators and clues of what is to be. First we looked towards the signs of the times, big and bold movements in the natural world (not unlike super moons and meteor showers!) that point to the coming day of our redemption and demand our wakefulness and watching. Then we noticed the signs along the way, a coming day called forth by John the Baptist where valleys are raised and mountains are lowered, where crooked roads are straightened and rough patches smoothed. Last Sunday, we heard again the story from the beginning — God’s story of love that stretched from garden to stable, filled with signs across time and space, signs pointing to the One who comes full of grace and truth. And on this fourth Sunday of Advent, when we light the candle of Love and draw ever closer to the manger, we look to the signs of Love revealed on the lips of the unlikeliest of sources — Mary and Elizabeth.

### II.

That’s where we pick up the story today in the hill country of Judea in a place not even named but a story that will change everything. As we just heard from the Gospel of Luke, Mary has received news unlike any in the history of humankind (and from an angel, no less): a son called Jesus will be conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit; that son will be great and holy, the son of God reigning over the house of Jacob in a kingdom that will never end.

Given a message like that, it's no wonder that Mary's first response is one of perplexity and curiosity!

But with courage that transcended anything expected of a person of her gender, age, race, life stage, marital status, social location, economic viability, and power, Mary heeded the sign of love and accepted God's invitation: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be." Immediately thereafter though, Mary set out – and the text says, "with haste" – to visit her relative, Elizabeth. We're left to wonder: did Mary simply want to confirm what she'd heard? Was she looking for a trusted source to tell her she wasn't crazy? Did she fear for her safety, or worry that she'd become an immediate outcast? Did she hear of Elizabeth's unexpected expectancy and desire to be in the company of another with an unusually holy pregnancy? Or did she simply need to be seen and heard, time filled with care, companionship, and advice on how to change a diaper?

Luke doesn't tell us, nor does he give us the full details of their relationship, but I imagine Elizabeth to be like an aunt figure for Mary. The companionship the two find with one another rings out through the ages: two women, overlooked and lowly, one too old and one too young, have been unexpectedly blessed with new life stirring within them – new life that is holy and scary and blissful and terrifying all at once. For in the community of women, between two of the unlikeliest carriers of the divine spark, signs of that new life and of God's new day abound. A baby we'll later call John the Baptist stirs and kicks and leaps in a womb already filled with surprise. Blessing pours forth on each other and the world. Prophetic song tells of a God who changes everything.

### III.

And at the center of it all is Mary. Mary, full of grace; Mary, favored by God; Mary, blessed among women; Mary, mother of Jesus; Mary, *theotokos*, or God-bearer; Mary, one who will bring forth into the world a sign and a savior of hope, peace, joy, and love for all the ages.

*But did you notice?: God's sign of love for the world doesn't just come to her, but through her.* Mary, unwed teenage mother; Mary, brown-skinned refugee; Mary, poor and powerless; Mary, human and flawed and unbelievable and just the one through whom God chose to bear light and life and love into the world.

Did you hear it? Did you hear the good news? That God chose Mary in all her fullness, all her humanness, all her lowliness, and all her unexpectedness is a sign to us all that, quite frankly, God could choose any one of us to bear light and life and love into the world. Yes, I said any of us! We the young, we the old, we the capable, we the challenged, we the women, we the men, we the privileged, we the impoverished... we the people are the ones through whom God beats swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. We're the companions through whom God's new day emerges, a new day where the proud are scattered and the powerful are brought down, a new day where the hungry are filled and the rich are humbled by emptiness, a new day where the lowly are lifted and love fills the whole world through the gift of a Son.

“That God comes to us as one of us is one thing, but that God comes to us [through] the lowliest of us is a whole other thing.”<sup>1</sup> For as the late Peter

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased from George Mason's great quote in “My Spirit Rejoices ... in Love,” December 20, 2015, [https://www.wilshirebc.org/download\\_file/view/3218/](https://www.wilshirebc.org/download_file/view/3218/)

Gomes once said: “Any god can make something good out of the exceptional and the extraordinary. It is our God who makes out of nothing, something; who takes nowhere and makes it somewhere; who takes nobody and makes [her] somebody.”<sup>2</sup>

That, my friends, is a sign pointing us to the truth of the gospel: God is at work in and through and among this world, and each one of us could be invited at any moment to be a bearer of the divine within it!

#### IV.

Every Christmas, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City displays a nativity scene just below its grand Christmas tree. This 18th century Neapolitan nativity bears a number of familiar sights – shepherds and wise men, angels and animals, doting parents, little babe. Many who notice it stop their seeing right there. But for those who *see*, who look through the familiarity to the truth shining like a sign through it, they spot the significance. For the backdrop of the scene isn’t a rough-hewn wooden stable in the little town of Bethlehem. Rather, the meeting place of those ‘hopes and fears of all the years’ is amidst the ruins of Rome – where ancient columns, decaying architecture, and broken buildings bear signs of gospel truth: the birth of God’s new day means the death of the old world as we’ve known it.<sup>3</sup>

In that, my friends, we all take heart. When we look all around our world and see signs of power and consumerism, signs of politics and a world order that seems to elevate some at the expense of others, signs of division

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Gomes, *Sermons*, p11.

<sup>3</sup> As told by Rev. Thomas Long in his sermon, “Where’s the Treasure?” from *Something Is About to Happen...*, p35.

and despair, signs of hatred and indifference and negligence and death, we can take heart. Because the God who brings signs of love **to** this world is the God who makes them come to life **through** the world, particularly through those of us who no one might see coming.

This Advent, this day, we ask, “what child is this?” But for a God that offers those signs of love through the world, we must ask that question of every one. Every person. Every body. Every friend and neighbor, every enemy and adversary. Because if God chooses Mary, then God can choose the child detained at the border or the lonely octogenarian. If God chooses Mary, then God can choose the frazzled parent or the widower. If God chooses Mary, then God can choose the anxious teenager, the addicted stockbroker, the quiet retiree, you and you and you and me.

#### V.

Friends, these signs of love, the signs of God’s new day are all around us – in and among and through us. I see them in you, the ways you are bearing God’s love in this world and giving birth to new life all around us. I see it in your care for one another, in your hope for our church, in your generosity of spirit and resources. I see it as you dream a new dream, as you hunger and thirst for God’s justice in our world. I see it as you open the scriptures and ask about the Christ who you read about within. I see it as you live in beloved community in the heart of the city called by Jesus to practice bold love of God and neighbor and boundless compassion for all people.

So how then shall we let God bear in us the signs of love and signs of the new day that dawned in a stable long ago? We have only to look to Mary, to hear from the one who returned God’s love in full measure: “my soul

magnifies the Lord,” she says. In what centuries later we now call the Magnificat, Mary speaks about what God will do in this new day. Did you hear? Did you notice that her song speaks in the past tense of a future reality – where God has shown strength, has scattered the proud, has brought down the powerful, has lifted up the lowly. Fred Craddock says that “to speak of what God has done is to announce what God will do.”<sup>4</sup> Through Mary, the world hears of a new day that dawns. Through Mary, signs of love are heard from age to age. Through Mary, we hear a melody of what song we’re invited to sing along ourselves.

Meister Eckhart (medieval mystic and theologian): “we are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: when the Son of God is begotten in us.”<sup>5</sup>

As we near the completion of what our friend Paul Baxley calls ‘the mad dash to the manger,’ as we gather with family and friends, as we wrap the final presents or bake the last cookie, as we find space to pause and rest and complete our waiting, may we become those who through our willingness to respond to God, become signs of God’s new day in the world. In the company of one another like Elizabeth and Mary, may we bless each other as those God uses for hope and peace and joy and love in the world. May we bear life

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<sup>4</sup> Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, p30.

<sup>5</sup> As quoted by Barbara Brown Taylor in “Mothers of God,” *Gospel Medicine*, p153.

like Mary into this world. And may our prayer be this: “O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today!”<sup>6</sup> Amen!

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<sup>6</sup> From “O Little Town of Bethlehem”