

POWER AND STRENGTH
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December 20, 2020
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church
Fourth Sunday of Advent

Based on Luke 1:26-38. Gabriel Grants Mary Power and Strength

God is my strength.

“Gabriel,” in the Hebrew.

Mary knows this already. That God is her strength. She has learned this, recited this, sung this wisdom from the Psalms in her first century version of Sunday School, growing up in Nazareth of Galilee.

God is my refuge and my strength, Mary has prayed from the Psalms over and over again. A very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear.

Mary has surely felt, in her Psalm-based prayers, throughout her young life, a sense of comforting trust that God truly is her strength, and your strength, and my strength *no matter what!* Which is our promise on this fourth Sunday of Advent as we prepare for the coming of Christ. In a time and a place where the power of our institutions have failed us. And our lives are literally on the line.

The truth is, we ARE afraid. At least I am. No matter how much we have prayed and sung and even experienced, up to now, the strength of God helping in times of trouble.

Even Mother Mary, who never trusted the institutions of power in this world, and whose life has always been on the line, even Mary, when she actually comes face to face with the God to whom she has prayed for strength, even Mary, when she physically encounters the power of God directed toward her through a messenger of God named Gabriel, even Mary, when she hears that she has found favor with God and that she will bear a son and that her son will rule an unending kingdom, even Mary stutters in the face of the very God she says is her strength.

“How can this be?” Mother Mary wants to know. What you are saying does not make any sense.

And she is right. And that is the point. The power of God *does not* make sense. Especially when it is staring you right in the face.

And so the strength of God, through the voice of Gabriel, must cut straight to the chase: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” Gabriel insists, in drill sergeant fashion, “and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

“And nothing will be impossible with God.”

Period.

For Mary, at least as the story is conveyed, this appears to be enough.

God says it; she believes it; and that settles it, as the bumper sticker says. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

The rest, as they say, is history.

Two thousand twenty years later, on this fourth Sunday of Advent, on the eve of the winter solstice - the Longest Night of this present darkness - the power of God, the strength of God, through the voice of Gabriel, comes to *us*: favoring us; blessing us; saying, "Fear not!"

And we say, "Yeah, right!"

We are most emphatically afraid! At least I am.

One COVID death *every thirty-three seconds!* Including our own Carol Martin, now in hospice with COVID at Homewood Retirement Community.

We are most emphatically afraid! At least I am.

A massive months'-long Pearl Harbor-type cyber-attack affecting every part of our government; weaponizing the very infrastructure that has kept us afloat in this pandemic.

We are most emphatically afraid! At least I am.

A President actively promoting martial law in an oval office meeting last Friday to undermine an election in states that voted against him.

Perhaps some very highly evolved among us can join Mother Mary in immediate obedience to God's "Fear Not" greeting through the angel Gabriel. But as our own Mary - Mary Bell - cautioned us in this week's Teach the Preacher gathering, "You can't just trust any old angel who pops into your life!"

You bet we are afraid!

The very name itself, don't forget - Mary - means "rebellious."

In fact, I would argue it is the very rebellious spirit of our Mother Mary, nurtured and encouraged through a community of rebellious spirits in Nazareth, training themselves through the power of God to resist the power of the Roman empire, I would argue it is this very rebellious spirit of our Mother Mary that so quickly recognizes the truth of Gabriel's message.

I would argue it is this very rebellious spirit of our Mother Mary that so quickly steps up to the plate. That says, Alleluia! God is calling *me* to conjoin the creative power of God with my own rebellious spirit. Alleluia! God is calling *me* to joyfully embrace the power of God gestating within me. Alleluia! God is calling *me* to "co-create" with God a new world order that will "scatter the proud, bring down the powerful, and lift up the lowly in order to fill the hungry with good things."

Not just in the world outside of myself, but also in the world within.

In fact, the power of God gestating within Mother Mary so infuses her with the awesome and righteous powerful strength of the Holy Spirit that she is able to proclaim the revolution of God's justice and peace *has already occurred*—in the past tense—because it has already occurred *within her very self!*

This is, as far as I can tell, the whole point of incarnation, for Mary and for us: God's power *is already with us*, blessing us, strengthening us, uplifting us, redeeming us, even when we can't quite make sense of it. Even when we are, with good reason, afraid.

God's power is even scattering whatever *in us* is proud or powerful in the ways of domination. God's power is even opening up *within us* the pride and power that is the way of God. Whether we are, by nature, "meek and mild gentle maidens" gratefully receiving the gift of God's power without question or rebellious radical revolutionaries for justice and peace.

Or perhaps a little bit of both.

The true promise of this fourth Sunday of Advent Two Thousand Twenty is that we get to join Mother Mary in shouting Alleluia for the power of the God *who is already our strength*. For the power of God that is more than just a helping hand to get us through the journey of this life. When the invitation comes, we get to join Mother Mary in an Alleluia for the power of God *to transform every part of our lives beyond recognition!*

Because that is what the life of faith is about. Total, utter, life-changing transformation through the power of the Holy Spirit. Welcoming the power of God into our very body, in order to bring about the salvation of the world. Saying "yes" to this power that makes no sense and never will. Committing to a future we cannot yet see but believe can yet bring good news.

It has been, believe it or not, nine long gestating months since our COVID "Safer at Home" convalescence. Every single one of us has been pregnant with the power and strength of God, bursting to be born in this season of hope. We are laboring as never before for God's justice and peace in our time—as Mary did in her time—and that is one dangerous mission, to be sure. But the power of God protects us, as we birth this present reality. The power of God envelops us, casts shade upon us, and yes, even *overshadows* us as we welcome the Prince of Peace once more.

And for that powerful presence, for that strength of our God, *Gabriel*, that will never fail us—ever!—may we joyfully join our sister Mary in saying, "Here am I, the servant of God; let it be with me according to your word."

Amen.