

Sermon of Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson Monday, August 15, 2011



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Luke: 1:26–38, 46–55
Mary, Mother of Our Lord

Grace to you and peace in Jesus' name. Amen.

I have a question, so please take out your voting machine. Oh, you obeyed the rules and left them in the plenary hall. Okay, so all of you—advisors and visitors, too—take out your *imaginary* voting machines.

Here is the question: “Like Mary, are we as a church ready to be moved by the power of the Holy Spirit?”

- Press 1 for Yes
- Press 2 for No
- Press 3 for “Moved? I just got here!”
- Press 4 for “I am totally confused, Bishop.”

Vote now. Voting is closed. Let's see the results. My screen says: “No results at this time. They will be posted Friday before adjournment.”

Are we ready, as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for the Holy Spirit to move us as the Spirit moved Mary? To know the answer we first must ask, “Are we ready to begin where Mary began when she responded to God's interrupting, God's disrupting word of promise by asking, ‘How can this be?’”

When was your life last so interrupted, so disrupted by God's grace that all you could say was, “How can this be?” Or has your life become so well-ordered, routines so set, relationships so secure, ministries so predictable that you honestly cannot remember the last time you joined with Mary in her pondering and her wondering, “How can this be?”

Perhaps it is just the opposite for you. Maybe your life has been in such turmoil—the economy so volatile, relationships so unstable, giving to your congregation so variable that nothing surprises you, nothing leaves you asking, “How can this be?”

Back to the question. Are we ready for the Holy Spirit to move us as the Spirit moved Mary? Are we ready to be moved from a “How can this be?” church to a “Let it be to us according to your Word” church?

To know the answer, we must ask whether we as a church stand with Mary. Is our response to God's absolutely interrupting, disrupting, dislocating, relocating, amazing grace Mary's response of awe and wonder? Or has God's disrupting word of promise become so familiar, so predictable, so domesticated by us that it leaves us neither perplexed nor pondering?

Just try to imagine what the angel Gabriel's announcement was like for Mary. “Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you!”

Mary had to have wondered, “With me? The Lord has found favor with me? Why? I have done nothing worthy of drawing God's attention. The Lord is with me? How can that possibly be?”

Oh, but Gabriel was not done. “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and his name will be Jesus.” And he kept going . . . “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his Kingdom there will be no end.”

“How can this be? Me, pregnant? I am a virgin. My child shall be called ‘Son of the Most High’ . . . the name reserved only for the son of Caesar. How is it possible that I can be both in a favored place, a favored relationship with God and yet—with this news that Gabriel brings me—I will be outside my community's moral boundaries in a place of disfavor? How can this be?”

Have you ever been there? Are you standing with Mary today? Does God's word of promise spoken to you not fit with how the community—yes, let us be honest, how the community of faith—regards or disregards you? Do you hear the church's commitment to being freed in Christ to serve the poor, but deep within you wonder what it is going to be like and how they will respond when you are honest with your fellow church members that you are one who is living in poverty, home facing foreclosure, and unemployed for 18 months or longer?

Are there those who deserve to hear God's disrupting, inviting word of grace, but they are having trouble getting within earshot of hearing it because they have been made to feel so unacceptable, so peripheral to our communities of faith? Do we talk so warmly about welcoming the stranger, the sojourner, but we really do not want to know about the one—the immigrant who lives in fear among us, lacking documentation?

What is it that you carry deep inside? What awareness about who you are or what you have done in the past? What fear of the future? What struggle diminishes your sense of self worth and makes you feel less than whole as a person?

Friends, God's gracious word of promise disrupts all such fears and feelings that have you trapped. God says to you today, “You are not less than human. In Christ you are a new creation. I do not hold your sins against you anymore. You are not peripheral. I have taken you in my merciful arms. In Christ, you

are reconciled to me and to those from whom you feel such deep alienation.”

“Do not be afraid.” This is God’s gift of grace given to you for Jesus’ sake. “How can this be?” It really is okay to be there with Mary, perplexed and pondering over the awe and the wonder of God’s disrupting grace given to you for Jesus’ sake.

“How can this be?” was more than Mary’s response to Gabriel’s greeting and announcement of her pregnancy. “How can this be?” became the refrain that became the response to the public ministry of Mary’s child. As people saw Jesus extend the embrace of God’s reign to outcasts and sinners, as Jesus embraced the despised and the diseased, as Jesus boldly healed on the Sabbath and engaged a Samaritan women in a public conversation about living water, as Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and rankled religious authorities, his critics cried out, “How can this be?”

Finally Jesus caused such disruption with God’s gracious word of promise that the cry, “How can this be?” turned into shouts of “This must not be. Crucify him! Crucify him!” Even the angel’s announcement on Easter morning, “He is not here. He is risen” left Jesus’ followers fearful and bewildered, asking, “How can this be? How can it be that not even death has the final word with us?”

But it is tempting for us to stay there, is it not? It is tempting for us as the ELCA to be content as a “How can this be” church, a community that finds its comfort zone among the ponderers. Skepticism becomes our first response when someone tells us of God’s disrupting, interrupting grace in their life. Suspicion becomes is our first posture toward our neighbor.

So are we ready for the Holy Spirit to move us with Mary? I believe that, as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we are being moved by the power of the Holy Spirit to sing Mary’s song of God’s disrupting, dislocating, relocating power.

Oh, yes, I believe the Holy Spirit is moving us to sing Mary’s Magnificat not only in the security of our sanctuaries, but also in the public square. It will take the Spirit’s power to embolden us to sing of God scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts and bringing down the powerful from their thrones.

In the midst of the gridlock over the debt ceiling and debt reduction debate, I went to Washington, D.C., to join other religious leaders in singing Mary’s song about God’s promise to fill the hungry with good things. But, I can tell you, the refrains of Mary’s song were not resounding throughout those halls of power. There seemed to be more willingness to dismantle programs than to draw a circle of protection around those programs that serve the hungry, the homeless, the most vulnerable in our land and around the world.

Friends, you know and I know that religious leaders singing Mary’s song are not packing people into sports stadiums for so-called religious rallies. In a consumer-oriented, competitive, what-has-God-done-for-me- lately? religious marketplace, we are not going to hear much about God dismantling structures that marginalize and exclude people in poverty or those whose race or gender or citizenship or sexual orientation, physical or mental abilities or health make them unwanted, unnoticed.

But that is Mary’s song, and it is Mary’s song that the Holy Spirit will give you the courage and voice to sing. It is Mary’s song of God bringing the despised and the marginalized, the outcast and the downcast, the defeated and the denied, and even the dead into a new place. The place where God is building the new creation—the new community in Christ.

When we have been disrupted by God’s grace, when we have been dislocated, when we have been knocked off balance by God’s word of judgment and left wondering, “How can this be?” the Holy Spirit moves us. The Holy Spirit relocates us into God’s abundant mercy, into a community of faith that with Mary believes “Nothing will be impossible with God.”

Oh yes, this is who we are as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—a community freed in Christ to serve. So let this assembly unfold. Come, Holy Spirit. Come with your power, Holy Spirit. Move us as you moved Mary. Move us to sing, to live Mary’s song. Move us to faith. Move us to a living, daring confidence in God’s grace. Move us to respond with Mary, “Here am I—here we are. Let it be to me—let it be to us, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, according to your word.”

So, like Mary, are we ready to be moved by the power of the Holy Spirit? Don’t forget—by adjournment Friday, we will have given our answer. Amen.