

What Ifs and What Is

Luke 1:39-55

About three decades ago, this week, on the 16th of December to be precise, Apartheid in South Africa came to an end. The word apartheid means 'apartness'. Apartheid was a system for keeping white people in South Africa separated from everyone who wasn't white. Remarkably, Apartheid's end was not followed by vengeance taking on those who had defended and maintained it all the while it was the law of the land. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was among the black leaders who opted for reconciliation with the supporters of Apartheid, instead of pursuing retribution. Desmond Tutu grew up under laws in South Africa that segregated people according to their race. Schools, homes and jobs were separated, making life much more difficult for those who weren't white. When he was a young boy, out walking with his mother, Desmond was surprised when a white priest, took off his hat as a sign of respect to his mother, a black woman. That sign of peace, friendship, and dignity had a lasting impact. It gave him a glimpse of what a world without apartheid might look like. A world where people treated each other as equals. *What if* following the example of Jesus' love—as that priest had done--could dismantle the *what is* of institutionalized inequality and racism? That is what Tutu wondered.

In our Gospel reading, we hear of two women whose own “what-ifs” challenged the “what-is” of their day. Elizabeth was the wife of a priest who served in the Temple in Jerusalem. For all the respect which that position imparted, hers was an unhappy existence because she had never been able to bear her husband a child. Her infertility made her less than equal to other women in her own eyes. And in theirs. In the eyes of others, it made Elizabeth an object of pity, at best. And an object of scorn, at worst. That was her “what is”. But Elizabeth wondered, “*what if* God was willing to change the *what is* of her inability to have children?” So, she prayed frequently and fervently for God to grant her the desire of her heart. God heard her “*what if* prayers”. She became pregnant and delivered a son. Not just any son. This child grew to be the one who would prepare people to recognize and receive God's Messiah when he appeared. We know Elizabeth's son as John the Baptist.

We also know Elizabeth's cousin. Her name was Mary. Mary was in some respects, a mirror opposite to her older cousin. Where Elizabeth's position as wife to a high priest brought her security; Mary was an ordinary peasant girl. Where Elizabeth was on the far side of the optimal window for child-bearing; Mary was a young, engaged, but unmarried virgin. Elizabeth took the initiative to beg God for a son. God took the initiative and sent an angel to Mary to reveal to her that she—despite being a virgin—would bear a son. For Elizabeth, the miraculous birth of her son would mean the end of

the shame she carried for so long. For Mary, the shame was just about to begin. The shame of being found pregnant before her wedding day. And not by the man to whom she would be wed. That was the “what is” that she faced. No wonder she “went with haste” from her home town to stay with Elizabeth in the country.

As soon as Mary entered her cousin’s house, Elizabeth was “filled with the Holy Spirit” and exclaimed, “blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” “Blessed” was probably not the word Mary would have chosen to describe her circumstances, or the future that awaited what the world would see as her illegitimate baby. But after listening to Elizabeth’s story of God’s action in her life, Mary’s own “what ifs” started to take a turn for the better. The shift in her outlook for the future is forever captured in what has come to be known as the Magnificat.

My soul *magnifies* the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit *rejoices* in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with *favor* on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on *all generations will call me blessed*;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done *great things* for me,
and holy is his name.

But it was not only the “what ifs” of her own life that had made a sharp reversal of direction. In the love that God had shown for her, Mary suddenly saw a template for how God’s relentless love could change the world. Not only how God’s love could transform her lowliness into blessedness; but how God always has, always does and always will never rest until the powerful are brought down from their positions of authority, and the lowly lifted up from their places of neglect and helplessness; until the hungry are filled with good things and the rich are sent away empty; and even the thoughts and schemes by which the proud tighten their grip on power will be scattered in the wind like chaff, to be replaced with minds set on justice and peace. And in a way that Mary still could not fully comprehend, her son—*her* son—would be the fulcrum upon which the balance tilted from hate to love.

In his book, *God Has a Dream*, Desmond Tutu wrote these words on the transformative potential of lives lived according to the pattern of Christ’s love:

'Dear Child of God, I write these words to you because we all experience sadness, we all come at times to despair, and we all lose hope that the suffering in our lives and in the world will ever end. I want to share with you my faith that... there is no such thing as a totally hopeless case. Our God is an expert at dealing with chaos, with brokenness, with all the worst that we can imagine. God created order out of disorder, cosmos out of chaos, and God can do so always, can do so now - in our personal lives and in our lives

as nations, globally. Indeed, God is transforming the world now - through us - because God loves us."

As the title of this sermon series suggests, this certainly has been an Advent for Uncertain Hearts. Expectations that we have long taken for granted have been shrouded in doubt due to the stubborn persistence of this pandemic. Each dream of returning to what once was normal has been deferred by one variant after another. Like those to whom Tutu wrote, we may be experiencing sadness, and despair and a loss of hope that the upheavals we are seeing in our lives and in our world, will ever end. Uncertainty has reigned, not only in our personal lives, but in the wider world in which we live. Apartheid may have been dismantled decades ago, but variants of the hatred and racism from which it grew continue to overwhelm our hopes for a more just and stable future for all.

Advent though, calls us to hold onto hope, as Elizabeth clung to her hope for a child. Advent invites us to an inner peace, like the peace of Mary who trusted God when faced with an uncertain future. Advent allows us to find joy, with each tentative step towards the future that Jesus' birth will surely bring to completion. Because the one constant certainty amid the uncertainties of life and the uncertainties of our hearts, is the love of God, which came down at Christmas to make its home in a lowly manger.

And has never left.

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