

“Announcing Hope”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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When I was a child in Michigan, we had a basement and there were bookshelves of my parents' books. Like many children do, I would poke around in my parents' books to see if there is anything good. There was this book called *Two From Galilee* by Marjorie Holmes that was a fictionalized history of the story of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. I loved that book because it allowed me to humanize the story. And, in some ways, you could say the kernel of this sermon started there when I was 12 reading this book.

So, today I want to invite you to reimagine the Christian story of Mary receiving and responding to the news that she will become pregnant with a son who will become king. It's a story of politics and sex, of religion and, most importantly, of the arrival of hope.

Let's begin by imagining Mary in historical context. She was a young, unmarried woman living in a poor country under Roman occupation. And, of course, she was Jewish. There's nothing special about Mary. She's just one of the many striving to make a life within limited resources. One of the many whom the Roman soldiers passed by each day. One of the many of whom the wealthy priests, collaborators with Rome, took little notice. Nor did Mary think of herself as much. For Mary, the future portended a household with Joseph, to whom she was betrothed—or engaged. A future not unlike the life of the many who surrounded her.

Until the great interruption to this future. When a message arrived that would change her future. *The* future. You will give birth to a son who will be King of your people. The biblical text describes Mary as “greatly troubled” by this news. The messenger quickly moves to assure her, “Don't be afraid.” Honestly, this feels like an impossible task when 1) a mysterious figure is speaking to you and 2) the message is that your life is about to be plunged into a prominent place in history in yet to be determined ways. So, when the angel adds, “but you're not alone, your elderly cousin, Elisabeth, is also about to have a baby in unusual circumstances,” well, then, Mary takes off to visit Elisabeth. When your world has just been turned upside down, you go looking for someone else who might believe you . . . who might assure you that you're not going crazy.

As religious liberals who tend to read scriptures more metaphorically than as historic accounts of fact, we might actually feel compelled to dismiss Mary as a bit crazy. Angels bringing messages? God making women pregnant...literally?! We've taken OWL [or sex ed]

classes. We know where babies *really* come from. Come to think of it, did Mary consent to God's sexual advances?!

What I find compelling in Mary's story is not the historical veracity, but what it says about a young woman's response to the news that just upended her world. Scholars of the historical Jesus have shown us a bit of what it was like in the 1st century. Roman occupation meant poverty for the masses and constant military presence on the street. One did not let young woman like Mary wander streets alone for fear of the soldiers. At the time of Jesus' birth, Rome or other occupying nations had been present in Israel on and off for centuries. The future did not look 'bright' for Mary or for the many other 'humble servants' of empire that made up the masses of Israel in those days.

And then her world ruptured. "Mary, you are going to become pregnant and have a son who will be king."

We talk about winning the lottery or falling in love as a welcome rupture of our lives. But, more often, we don't seek such sudden changes. We prefer the predictable of the status quo. In a familiar world, we know how to navigate. We know what to expect.

And yet, ruptures come to all of us. We are laid off. A bad diagnosis is received. The phone rings and brings news of a sudden death. The headlines alert crosses our screen. We huddle together around the radio, the tv, the computer. What *is* happening?! What we thought we knew and understood about the world is suddenly . . . gone.

For many, the recent election ruptured the world we thought we knew. A world in which we trusted our state institutions and fellow Americans to help build an ever more tolerant society. A world that embraced differences of race, class, sexuality, and nationality . . . or at least was increasingly moving in that direction. Instead we find ourselves in a world where people feel emboldened to embrace hate. Where political leaders are willing to disregard the science of climate change to our shared peril. And, where a fierce anger about economic injustice points to a pain of which we may not have been fully aware.

Sometimes the world as we know it comes apart and we find ourselves unable to see or think clearly. The uncertainty can feel like a kind of mental and moral darkness. How do we *see* into the future when our world has suddenly become unknown and unpredictable to us?

In such moments of uncertainty, we need hope as the beacon that beckons us forward into the unknown. In her book, *Hope in the Dark*, author Rebecca Solnit writes,

“Hope locates itself in the premises that we don’t know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcome—you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It’s the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. We may not, in fact, know them afterward either, but they matter all the same, and history is full of people whose influence was most powerful after they were gone.”ⁱ

There is much that we do not know about the near and further future. Here in this place of uncertainty is where we do find hope dwelling—coaxing us to act, to believe that our actions matter . . . even when we do not know the outcome.

To illustrate the power of hope, Solnit tells a story of a small group of women who chose to protest one day outside the White House. It was a cold, rainy, uncomfortable day. One woman later admitted, she stood there questioning why she was bothering to be there. What difference might a handful of women standing in the rain make? Years later, this same woman read an account of a man who had become a high-profile activist on the issue she had protested. His turning point arrived, he explained, after “spotting a small group of women standing in the rain, protesting at the White House. If they were so passionately committed, he thought, he should give the issue more consideration himself.” (3)

As I described several weeks ago, I believe we are like defiant butterflies—called to take action on our principles without knowing the full impact of our actions. Such actions are rooted in hope—hope that somehow, someday, such actions might have an impact. Such a hope embraces the unknown for its possibilities.

When the world as we know it has been ruptured, the future becomes unknown. Hope is a response to the uncertainty that holds fast to both principle and possibility. Hope beckons us forward.

Imagine again a young woman whose life has just been ruptured by the news that she will become pregnant and bear a child who will be king. Secretly within her body, the seed of a hope that will change the world begins to grow. She does not know that the local ruler will send men to try and kill her infant. She does not know that she will need to flee her nation for another. Nor does she know that one day her son will be a king—but a revolutionary leader of the spirit, not of an army. She does not know that her son will be executed for being a king. She does not know the stories of resurrection, the centuries of theological

debate and religious war. She does not know of Bach cantatas and Raphael paintings of her son . . . and herself, the Madonna, mother of Jesus.

The Christian season of Advent invites us to forget all that we know about the story to come. Forget all that is *known* and place ourselves instead in a moment of a ruptured, uncertain world—when all that we have is hope. Hope that a new world is waiting to be born. A world of greater freedom. A world with less fear, violence, soldiers and war. A world of less poverty and economic inequality. A world of more song and joyous celebration.

Mary responded to the rupture of her world with the words of the Magnificat—a exuberant song of gratitude, defiance, and hope. In Mary’s song, the weak will be honored, the mighty thrown from their thrones; the hungry will be filled and the wealthy left empty. The rupture signals a reversal of fortunes, an abrupt shift in the status quo. Her hope arises from the message that she has a role to play in the new world—she will bear a child. She has not been forgotten beneath the weight of Roman occupation. She, a humble servant, has been seen by the Most High. She has been given hope and a role to play. With so much still uncertain, she embraces her role and holds fast to her hope that the God of her understanding will transform the world.

We too are in a season of Advent . . . and not simply because of the Christian influenced calendar of our culture. We are in a season of Advent because the world as we have known it has been ruptured. We do not have a clear vision of where the story will go from here. We are waiting for an unknown future. And, in the waiting, we are beckoned by hope to act. We are called to hold fast to our highest values and visions for what is good and right and moral. Though we may not know the impact of our actions, hope beckons us to believe in the possibilities and to take action now in the dark. Solnit writes,

[H]ope is not about what we expect. It is an embrace of the essential unknowability of the world, of the breaks with the present, the surprises. Or perhaps studying the record more carefully leads us to expect miracles—not when and where we expect them, but to expect to be astonished, to expect that we don’t know. And this is grounds to act. I believe in hope as an act of defiance, or rather as the foundation for ongoing acts of defiance, those acts necessary to bring about some of what we hope for while we live by principle in the meantime. There is no alternative, except surrender. And surrender not only abandons the future, it abandons the soul. (109-110)

Hope beckons us to act in the dark space of uncertainty. We too have roles to play in our ruptured world. In the uncertainty of this moment, we are invited to live by principle, to engage in ongoing acts of defiance, and to hold fast to hope that the possibilities for a

better, more tolerant, more liberal, more loving world are real, even if the path forward is never entirely certain.

So may we act.

Amen.

ⁱ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, Third Edition, (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Press, 2016), *xiv*.