

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey St. Matthias Episcopal Church, Minocqua, Wisconsin

Despite being a fictional character, coach Ted Lasso, an American college football coach hired to coach a professional English soccer team in Great Britain, from the TV series that bears his name, gave some excellent inspirational speeches. Especially when his team was most in need of a little extra help facing challenging games or life situations. For example, in the first season of the show, the team was just starting to play better together on and off the field – or pitch as it is called in England. However, as pressure grew to have a winning season, instead of feeling hopeful that the team would win, Ted started hearing from his players and residents of the community a phrase he took umbrage with: It is the hope that kills you.

In a speech to his team, Ted told them he disagreed with this phrase, and in his opinion, it was the *lack* of hope that would get you. He reminded them he believes in hope. He believes in belief. And then told them where he is from, we have a saying, that is really a question that can inspire sports teams and anyone facing a challenge. The question is: Do you believe in miracles? He gave them a moment to consider their answer before using it to rally them to action.

In his way, Ted Lasso reminds me of Mary, Jesus' mother in today's Gospel. Because, like Ted, Mary believed. She believed in the greatest miracle of all; one greater than any inspirational sports story, or personal achievement story. Mary believed God does what God promises.

Today's Gospel finds Mary arriving at her cousin Elizabeth's house. Just before this, Mary had received a visit from the angel Gabriel asking her to participate in God's promise, and she not only said yes, she gave a holy yes. A holy yes is not blind obedience or submission, it is agreeing to set aside her dreams and expectations to participate in whatever God is up to. Which can require saying no to some things most people say yes to such as certain marriage traditions or other social customs of her time.

That might be why the angel sent Mary to her cousin Elizabeth who was also pregnant. While not as miraculous as Mary's pregnancy, Elizabeth's did defy expectations for women of "a certain age". Which meant Elizabeth could help Mary navigate challenges she would face for a pregnancy the society of her time was probably not accepting of. And when Mary arrived, we read Elizabeth welcomed her by calling her blessed, revealing she already knew about Mary's yes to God. A yes that carried within Mary God's promise of salvation fulfilled at last.

What made Mary blessed was not Jesus. Nor was Mary blessed because she was somehow pure, faultless, meek, submissive, or obedient without questioning God. If you look closely at the text, Elizabeth said what made Mary blessed is she believed God would do what God promised.

Elizabeth's words inspired Mary to sing a remarkable song, one we call The Magnificat, that has been set to numerous tunes and sung in cathedrals, concert halls, and parishes of all sizes, including this one. But the wonder in her wonderful song (at least for today) is not in the tune. The wonder in this song is in the words.

Songs like this are an Old Testament tradition, going way back to the prophet Deborah in the book Judges that praises God for fulfilling God's promise to protect God's people in what some scholars think may be the oldest words in the Old Testament. Another song like it can be found in the book Exodus when Miriam sang praises to God after God provided safe passage for God's People through the Red Sea when they were finally free from oppression. Perhaps the song most like Mary's is that of Hannah in 1 Samuel who expressed thanksgiving to God for her pregnancy. Because of this tradition, scholars doubt Mary actually sang her Magnificat in real life. While that might be disappointing, it need not diminish its meaning or impact. After all, the author of Luke's Gospel gave it to Mary for a reason.

In Luke's Gospel, Mary is a model disciple. Her song is, as New Testament scholar N. T. Wright says, "the gospel before the gospel," and sounds a lot like Jesus' Beatitude sermon. Mary models the holy yes any follower of Jesus can give. The holy yes does not have to be about having a baby; it is making space within us for the divine, for God to be present in and through us. Such a yes requires saying no to some things, which can be difficult and uncomfortable, but like Ted Lasso, Mary gives us the inspiration we need to believe through her magnificent speech.

In the first half of her speech, Mary gives all credit to God, and her belief that through the miracle of her pregnancy God had already fulfilled the promise of salvation. The second half of her speech describes that salvation as God's Kingdom come to earth: God has shown strength, scattered the proud in the thoughts in their hearts, brought down the powerful, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich away empty, and helped God's people. All Kingdom of God things. Perhaps the linguists among us noticed the verbs in this part of Mary's speech are all in the past tense. But some things get lost in translation. And there is something even more powerful in this part of Mary's speech.

In the Biblical Greek classes I took in seminary, I learned in the original Greek this Gospel was written in, all those verbs are *not* in the past tense. They are in what is called the past perfect tense, meaning not only have they already happened, they are over and done, fully completed. In her speech, which was given before Jesus was born, before the trip to Bethlehem, before angels sang to shepherds, and even before the magi loaded up their gifts to follow the star, Mary was stating emphatically that God had already done what God promised to do, and God's Kingdom had come. That's some powerful belief.

Belief that can help us whenever we encounter all the discouraging stuff in life that delights in contradicting Mary. The heavy mindset that insists hope is what kills you. The darkness that manifests in every act of injustice, every painful loss, every act of greed, every abuse of power, every new act of violence that results in trauma and loss of life like the shooting in Abundant Life Christian School last Monday and the tragedy in Magdeburg Germany on Friday. All the things that can weigh heavy on us. But Mary's speech, her Magnificat, reminds us darkness, no matter how devastating, does not have the last word.

In a recent Living Compass podcast, the Rev. Scott Stoner said a common response to tragedies and losses is to gather for candlelight vigils where people light candles, pray and sing together. The act of lighting a candle is a way to defy the darkness, both physical and spiritual. Scott also reminds us something remarkable happens at those events. People share the light by lighting each other's candles. When one candle is lit from another, the light grows and the candle that shared its light didn't lose anything, and shines just as brightly as it did before. That is a miracle because normally giving something away usually means having less. If you give a dollar away, that's one dollar less you have. However, sharing light doesn't cost anybody anything. It just spreads the light.

That kind of sharing doesn't only happen with candles. That is what happened when Elizabeth welcomed Mary by calling her blessed, and Mary radiated her belief in her hopeful song, that reaches out to this very day inviting us to light our hearts from hers, a light that cannot be extinguished, because God has already done what God promised. Despite our fears and doubts, despite allowing marketers, politicians and social media to divide us, despite our disappointments, despite all the greed and violence and injustice, even despite whether or not we believe, God, in God's tremendous love for us has already acted. I suspect Ted Lasso is right. It's the absence of hope that'll get you, because hope can shed light on God's love at work in miracles we will notice whenever we open our hearts like Mary and believe there is no darkness that can prevail.