

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
“God has filled the hungry with good things.”
Luke 1:53
December 19, 2021

The Fourth Sunday of Advent brings us to the meeting of two women, Elizabeth and Mary, each in their own way bearing the hope of the world in their bodies. Elizabeth is, we’re told, advanced in years and barren, or she was until the unspeakable, impossible happened. Now she is with child. And Mary is, too, young Mary, virgin Mary, unspeakably, impossibly with child. What is impossible has come to be. For what was previously unspeakable, these two women find words. God has done great things for me.

Among Mary’s words in her song of praise are these “God has filled the hungry with good things.” I’d like us to spend our morning with that one line and all its promises: “God has filled the hungry with good things.”

Mary uses a past tense verb, as if God has already done this. One commentator notes that prophets, like Mary is here, are always using wrong verb tenses. They say things have already happened when they are clearly yet to happen. But prophets are to be forgiven because they see as God sees; they see past and present and future as if all that God intends has already been accomplished. It’s as if, in their vision, it’s already done.

From our perspective we would say that what Mary says is that the God who has become incarnate within her is the God who fills the hungry with good things and will do this.

The *hungry* here doesn’t just mean someone who is mildly ready to eat another meal; it’s not just a want or a small desire. It’s a need, a compulsion. This hunger is like starvation, a pining for what you don’t have. In automobile terms, your tank is on empty. Your tank is so low it won’t even tell you how many miles you supposedly have until you’re out of gas. You’re on fumes. Hunger is emptiness. The great preacher Charles Spurgeon reflected that hunger is different from other physical needs. A person wearing shabby clothes may not even notice, if the weather is mild. A person living in a shanty shack may be inhabiting the driest place they’ve been in a long time. But a person who’s hungry has an internal need, an internal pain that overwhelms their senses until it is satisfied. That’s what Mary invokes here. True hunger.

Humans hunger. If we go without it long enough, we hunger for food to sustain us. It’s one of our universal basic human needs. But man does not live by bread alone. We hunger for more, too. Maybe everyone is different in their desires but there are some basic human needs I think we all share in common.

We hunger *for human connection* like a starving person needs food. We hunger for this. Human connection is one of the orphans of life in a pandemic era. We went so quickly from living in a

world where we showed up for one another for joy and in times of need to living in a world where we were told that if we showed up for one another, you might kill each other. It was disorienting, devastating. And reknitting the fabric of community is going to take some time. If you have felt lonely or isolated or forgotten, ironically, you're not alone.

We've found workarounds of course, just like we've found workarounds for truly good food in busy lifestyles. We've tried to fast-heat community in zoom microwaves. And we've held off touching one another. And we've covered our faces and our smiles and our tears.

But we were made for human connection. It's all been devastating. If I thought the desire for genuine human connection was the main energy fueling the angry, anti-mask, covid-denying movement, I'd actually be very sympathetic to it. Lockdowns and masks and social distancing and all of that do diminish our humanity. Truly. Somewhere buried in all the noise, is, I think, a deep fear that we are in danger of losing something basic to our humanity. And that's worth fighting for. I'm just not sure that's what some people are really fighting for. I think some people are just fighting because some people have to be in conflict to know they are alive.

They have a hunger for human connection, even if distorted. Looking for a fight, any fight isn't the only way human connection is twisted. Our desire to give and receive love can become something twisted out of shape into something very other and much less than true love; our need to be accepted can lead us to become someone we aren't and didn't want to be. Our need for affirmation can drive us to do things we don't want to do to impress people we're not even sure we like. But we have this hunger for human connection.

Like we hunger for food we hunger for human connection, and likewise, we hunger for life's purpose. I think we share this in common, too. We desire for our lives to mean something. We have a hunger for this, for life to have been worth it, for our place in the world to matter. We need to matter to someone, for something. This is a hunger within us, too. Even my dog instinctively knows he wakes up with a purpose. His job is to patrol the backyard for squirrels and any evidence that a squirrel has been anywhere near it. So, he wakes up ready to report for duty, first to surveil the yard and then to keep vigil over his kingdom. It's a very important job for which he is very well qualified. We all need a purpose in life, to feel like our lives matter. It doesn't mean we need to be rich, unless we confuse riches with meaning. It doesn't mean we need to be famous, unless we confuse fame with meaning. It doesn't mean we have to be successful in everything, unless we confuse success with meaning. We all have a desire for our lives to have a purpose to them. Show me someone who knows who they are and who knows why they wake in the morning, and I'll show you someone who is feasting at the table of life. We are hungry for it.

I read recently of a 30-something year-old man who invested early in Bitcoin and became fabulously wealthy and retired at age 35. Now he says his life is unsustainably boring. He can't stand the purposelessness he feels in life and tried to go back to work. And now he can't find joy in work because the urgency is out of getting up and working for a day's living. He says his

life has become meaningless, even with the sort of dream that so many people carry with them. What we hunger for is purpose.

Ron Rolheiser calls the hunger the fire that burns within us. He says we are born with this fire and it does not extinguish. “It’s not easy, especially when we’re young, to make peace with the fires inside us. We need to establish our own identity and find, for ourselves, intimacy, meaning, self-worth, quiet from restlessness, and a place that feels like home. We can spend 50 years, after we’ve first left home, finding our way back there again.” (*Spirituality and the Second Half of Life*, Aug 24, 2003).

Now, in the world Mary sees, in the world she prophesies, God fills the hungry. If her word for hunger is the superlative for “need,” then her word for “to fill” is the superlative of satisfaction. The hungry aren’t just given a scrap so they can get by. Not just offered a morsel. The hungry come to a feast, like a person fasting for a whole Advent season pulls up a chair to a Christmas feast for the ages. A banqueting table, a feast is one of the bible’s favorite images for God’s favor. And why not? We were made for festival, made for delight and for joy. The hungry are filled. The word for filled means satisfied, satiated, stuffed full, packed in. It means to be bursting. I know we associate those ideas with food as pain and regret after a too-large meal, but imagine a perfect meal eaten perfectly. Just the exact right amount for maximum sustenance and joy. That’s to be filled. The hungry are filled.

And not just filled, not filled with filler, with garbage, with Cheetos—though I love me some Cheetos, but they’re not real food. We’re not just filled with filler, but with good things. It’s not stretching the idea too much to say the *best* things. What God fills us with, what we hunger for truly, is for good food and good human connection and good purpose. The world offers us all manner of ways to fill up on things less than good—less than good food, less than good relationship, less than good work.

But in Mary’s vision, the hungry are filled with good things. Our hunger for sustenance is met with the best, most nourishing foods from God’s bounty, our hunger for human connection is met with lifelong friendships and genuine love. Our hunger for purpose is met with meaningful ways to bear good news for our loved ones and for the world.

Those who ravishingly hunger will be stuffed full of goodness. This is the world born in her. And it is born to us.

Is this just wishful thinking, that God would meet the true hungers of our hearts with good? Some days it seems like that’s all it could be. Is it unthinkable, unspeakable, impossible? It can seem that way someday, but remember this: When Mary said all of this, she was looking wide eyed, right at Elizabeth, an aged, barren woman whose womb God had filled with child. She was looking wide eyed at Elizabeth who was standing there looking wide eyed right back at her, as they both cradled their bellies in their hands.

Elizabeth is the icon of “Look what God has done to answer prayers I hardly dared pray anymore.” Mary is the icon of “Can you believe what god is doing? I hardly even imagined what could be possible and possible in me.”

Mary is the prophet of God’s vision; Elizabeth is the icon of our hope. That those who hunger shall be filled in every way they imagined and in ways they could hardly yet imagine. With goodness, with good things.

I pray this for you. I pray for you that you be filled with God’s good things in your hungers. And I pray that all our hungers lead to hunger for God. May we hunger and thirst for God in every aspect of our lives. For some of us that will look like daily bread shared around a table, for others like a true friend when you most need them to be the presence of Christ, for others still, the gift of direction in life--a purpose in and beyond ourselves. In all of this, it is God we hunger for. May your hunger pain be met by abundance, stuffed and packed down to overflowing, satisfied joy.

Amen.

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