

Mary would not have made it in the National Football League.

It's not because she lacked toughness, though...she is as strong and endures as much pain as anyone in Scripture not named God.

Apparently she travels well, appearing widely on freeway underpasses and breakfast waffles worldwide, and she always sells tickets.

And the incredible stories about her that have grown up in Christian tradition make it obvious that she is good for fantasy.

The reason that Mary would not make it in the NFL is the excessive celebration penalty.

It's not so much that the officials have to throw a flag on joy so abundant and exuberant and pure, but that she is celebrating at absolutely the wrong time.

Mary is a young, unwed teenager who finds herself pregnant in a patriarchal culture, which is fourth and long, with no punter.

Her life, and the life inside her, is in serious danger.

Yet listen to her sing.

It pummels the ears, like a small time shrimper in the gulf singing a love ballad to BP.

"My soul magnifies the oil industry, for it has done great things for me!

It has looked with favor on the lowliness of its customer;

surely from now on all generations will call me blessed!

BP has purified the gulf, whose cleansed waters have brought forth an abundance of life and fortune far greater than any settlement check.

The world has overcome fossil fuels and seen the resilience of nature,
and God has kept holy promises to creation."

The old shrimper and the young girl sing of a beautiful but basically impossible future *in the past tense*, as if they have already been accomplished, as if their fantasies are a sweet memory.

That is at the heart of why we celebrate Mary, who had the crazy courage to do the end zone dance immediately after throwing an immaculate interception, not because she didn't understand what was happening, but because she did.

Faith in God is the art of premature celebration.

It is not grounded in appearance or evidence or circumstance but only and squarely in the triumphant goodness of God.

The God of Abraham whose descendants flowered from a womb that grew nothing until the nursing home years is now the God of Mary, the pregnant schoolgirl.

This God works in mysterious unto impossible ways to keep crazy promises and to bless those whose lives look anything but blessed.

Those who have eyes to see it and the spirit to embrace it break out in song as if it has already happened, so confident are they that God's future is as safe and certain as ancient history.

Faith looks forward nostalgically, gratefully, and sings praise for what hasn't occurred yet.

Faith is the art of excessive premature celebration, which actually helps the prophecies and the promises come true.

Today we look back at Mary and learn this again from her.

We celebrate Mary in part because thousands of years ago, Mary celebrated us.

Her faith, her song, her vision of a world made right where every person has dignity is no one is

trapped either by having too little or by having too much, is inspiration for a community called to follow her son and to keep singing her song.

Bethel Lutheran Church, whose choir blesses us today with their own music of faith, and whose story features its own Saint Mary, is a part of God's promise and Mary's prophecy come breathtakingly true.

Stick around right after worship today both to savor more of their song and to hear more of their story.

In the late 1970s, the west side of Chicago was blighted with economic ruin, poverty and deep hopelessness.

Bethel looked around at the wreckage and began to sing.

They bought a building and hosted a modest fundraising dinner they called Gumbo Gala. Good luck getting a ticket now; it's one of the best and most glamorous nights in all of Chicago. Yet it remains what it started out as...a celebration.

It's a celebration, not only of thirty years of economic redevelopment and real, tangible hope since that first Gumbo Gala, but also it's a celebration of all that God will yet someday do through Bethel Lutheran Church and the little multi-million dollar operation it started a blessed generation ago on a shoestring and a soup label and a song.

It's a celebration anticipated with joy by Mary, who sang thanks and praise to God for lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things and leveling the playing field and showing strength and reliability on the west side of Chicago two thousand years later as if she had already seen them happen.

Of course Mary had no idea where, or how, or what, but she was very clear about Who, and that's why she was able to sing.

And that's why we are able to sing.

We at Resurrection, who prematurely celebrated the ordination of a lesbian pastor and who sang and danced in the rain in this very street after losing a ton of money and attracting approximately nobody at our first SummerFest, are privileged to join Bethel and Mary and a wide and weird and wonderful worldwide family named church in a giddy song of faith...

faith not in perfect plans or in favorable outcomes...

faith not in our ability to get our own way or to achieve our own success...

faith not in good weather or a good economy or good circumstances...

but faith in the One who fills us inside out with good news that at first sounds anything but good.

You're pregnant.

Your neighborhood has crumbled.

Your environment is toxic.

You lost a lot of money.

You're going to die.

Praise God, magnify the Lord, rejoice in God your Savior!

Christ triumphs at the cross, so when we are marching toward despair, we are moving in the right direction.

When you are overwhelmed, give thanks.

When life is bleak, sing.

Unspeakingly beautiful days are ahead.

God has already finished them.