

Advent 4 C Sermon
Luke 1:46-55
December 19, 2021

“Marvelous Mary”
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*And Mary said,
‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for God has looked with favour on the lowliness of this servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is God’s name.
God’s mercy is for those who fear God
from generation to generation.
God has shown strength with their arm;
and has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
God has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
God has helped their servant Israel,
in remembrance of God’s mercy,
according to the promise made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.’*

I’m glad that today’s reading is finally starting to sound like Christmas. Some of you are probably relieved. After last week’s appointed text from Luke’s gospel and the mad tirade of a camel-hair-wearing, locust-eating prophet named John the Baptizer, you may have been wondering: “How

long, Reverend, until we get to the good part—the Christmassy part?” This is likely one of the very few times that a story of an unwed teenage mother-to-be comes as good news! Honestly though, I am relieved.

Today is the last Sunday in our season of Advent waiting. The kids are getting restless, the fresh tree isn’t looking quite as fresh, we’ve repaired the wrapping paper on at least one package that the dog just won’t leave alone, and the anticipation of giving that special gift to that special person is eating us up. It’s nearly here. The next time we gather in this beautiful room it’ll be Christmas Eve. The nostalgia will be overwhelming, the buzz in the air undeniable, and the faintest sound of angel song will surely echo in all our ears. So today, let’s linger in that little town in the Judean hill country with young Mary and her elder cousin Elizabeth. Let’s wait with them, just a little longer, on the threshold of what is about to become.

In truth, they had already been waiting a long time. For several centuries, the Jewish people had been waiting for a messiah that would arise, overthrow their foreign oppressors, and bring about a time of peace and prosperity.

Luke’s story places Mary at the home of her elder cousin Elizabeth, a short time after an angel had announced her unplanned pregnancy. Painted as obedient, submissive, servile, virtuous, and chaste, Mary has been elevated by the church as the paramount exemplar of motherhood by men who seek these particular traits in their women. However, Luke’s account reveals that there’s so much more to marvelous Mary.

A youth of 12-13 years, Mary found herself pregnant and engaged, but still unmarried. In the honor-based culture of first century Israel, she was faced with a choice: stay put and carry the child, hoping that her fellow Nazarites would show compassion instead of meeting out the punishment of stoning prescribed by the law; or flee and carry the child to term

somewhere else, away from knowing eyes. Imagine being a child of 12-13 years faced with this choice. Mary chose to flee and took sanctuary in the hill country with Elizabeth.

After her cousin's affirming greeting, we hear Mary's voice for the first time since the angel's announcement, and she sings the canticle now known as the Magnificat. On account of the child growing inside her, Mary calls herself blessed. On account of the child growing inside her, she prophetically declares that the proud are scattered, that the powerful are brought down from their thrones, the lowly are lifted up, the hungry are filled, and the rich are sent away empty. On account of the child growing within her, Mary announces that the world is about to turn, that the structures of power and privilege are reversed, that the waiting is finally over.

Luke does not paint Mary as meek, pliant, and passive. She is so much more than a divinely-appointed incubator! She has tapped her source of inner strength. She is a poet and a prophet and a sage. And before he's ever born, Mary sings of a world her child is changing and she wills that change to be. This Mary is the archetypal activist! She is the penultimate protestor! She is the ideal role model for every man, woman, and child on earth seeking to make meaningful social change. She recognized the brokenness of her world, she imagined a better world, and, until her dying day, she worked to make it so. It could be said that Jesus inherited his spunk from her.

And yet, many of us are no doubt wondering, where *is* this hopeful future Mary so confidently assured Elizabeth was coming to be? The truth is, Mary's marvelous Magnificat exemplifies the paradox of the Christian faith. On the one hand, Jesus has already come, lived, died, and been committed to the annals of history and legend. On the other hand, we're waiting, even now, to celebrate his birth.

If the stories recorded in the gospels contain even a shred of truth, we can be sure that Jesus did his job—did precisely what Mary sang he would do. In word and in deed, Jesus blessed the poor and fed the hungry while scorning the powerful and rebuking the elite. Jesus began the great reversal of power and privilege that Mary sang about, but the work is not done.

Today, I invite us to carry two traits of the magnificent Mary into the week with us. The first: patience. In many ways, Mary inherited this trait from her forebears—from those Jewish women and men who'd been oppressed and abused by nations and empires for centuries, if not millennia. But, Mary was not *just* patient. She was also participating—in the change she longed to see for her people and for her world. She sang it into being, birthed it into being, nurtured it into being, and never stopped believing it into being. She participated.

The call to us, these many centuries later is not so different. We too are called to be patient—to know that the way it is now is not the way it will always be. But, we are also called to be participating—to taking an active role in bringing about the world we long to see.

And so, if you walk away with nothing more from this sermon than a fresh perspective on one of history's most tragically underrated activists, then so be it. But, if you walk away and decide to carry a little bit of her with you, take her patience and make it your own. Take her participation deep into yourself and follow in her footsteps: lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry, reversing the structures of power and privilege, and rebuilding the world as it should be—as it can be. May it be so. Amen.