

Advent III A Sermon
Luke 1:47-55
December 11, 2022

“Revolutionary Magnificat”
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After Mary conceived, she set out to see her cousin Elizabeth. When she arrived, she sang a song known to us now as the Magnificat. Hear these words of Mary from the Gospel According to Luke, the first chapter:

⁴⁶“My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of this servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God’s name. ⁵⁰God’s mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. ⁵¹God has shown strength with God’s arm and has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴God has helped this servant Israel, in remembrance of God’s mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

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The third Sunday of Advent is special. Not only do we take a break from the blue and light a pink candle and, if you happen to have one, wear a pink stole, it’s a Sunday when we unabashedly focus on joy—ahead of the joy-to-the-world we’re waiting to be born on Christmas. The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called *Gaudete* or *Rejoice* Sunday. Our reading from Luke’s gospel makes it obvious why. “My soul magnifies the Lord,” Mary sings, “and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.” Honestly, if an unmarried, pregnant, teenager growing up in Roman-

occupied first century Palestine where the penalty for her “condition” was death by stoning can be joyful, shouldn’t we be? If we were in Mary’s shoes, would we be? If Mary knew, as we do, that in a few short months she would find herself homeless in Bethlehem and giving birth in a stable, according to Luke, or a refugee in Egypt seeking asylum from a mad king Herod bent on murdering her child, according to Matthew, would she still be so darn joyful? Honestly, I think she would. Mary was amazing, and not for the reasons people usually think.

Mary has traditionally been remembered for her virtue, purity, chastity, and submission to the divine will. In the centuries following her death, as folks participating in our Wednesday Advent Study can tell you, elaborate stories circulated about her immaculate conception to aged parents, Anna and Joachim; her childhood growing up in the temple and being fed by angels; and her willing acceptance of the betrothal arranged by the priests to the widowed and elderly carpenter Joseph. Mary is portrayed as a model of submission, strangely receptive to the bizarre machinations of God and men, and instinctively mothering, despite being little more than a child herself. Truthfully, her memory has been co-opted and employed as a pawn in a male-dominated game of chess to keep women in perpetual check. But that Mary is not the Mary of Luke’s gospel, or Matthew’s gospel, or history itself. That Mary is a myth.

The Magnificat, Mary’s bold and brazen song of protest recorded in Luke’s gospel, tells us something about her. Mary sang in the tradition of the many strong Jewish women before her, women like the prophet Miriam who sang resistance in the face of the slavery of her people in Egypt; like the prophet and judge Deborah who sang resistance in the face of the oppression of her people by the king of Canaan; like the once-childless Hannah who sang resistance in the face of ridicule and social ostracization. Mary sang protest and resistance in the face of an evil occupying empire. Mary sang hope in the face of cruelty, poverty, and oppression. Mary sang the reversal of the status quo where the powerful would be brought down and the lowly lifted up, the hungry would be filled

and the rich sent away empty. Mary “seized an opportunity for a lead role in God’s liberation of her people.”¹ Is this the Mary you know?

We don’t really *know* a heck of a lot about Mary, when it comes down to it. Other than the relatively undisputable facts that she lived in Nazareth in the first century, married a fella named Joseph, and had a son named Jesus, there’s just not an awful lot to go on. Even the gospel accounts don’t tell us much about her—about who she really was, what she believed, what she dreamed. That’s why her song is so important, because, if we’re honest, it paints a picture of her that we don’t get anywhere else and it counters the prevailing caricatures of her that have been handed down through the ages.

If the song can be trusted, Mary was bold, strong, joyful even, in spite of it all. Mary believed she was blessed. Mary had a dream for the world that could be—would be. And it was a good dream. It still is.

I wonder what Mary would think of the way we celebrate Advent—the season of preparation, of waiting. She, of course, knew better than anyone else what it means to wait for Jesus’ coming. But, her waiting was different from that of any of the rest of us. She waited to be his mother.

I wonder what Mary would think of the way we celebrate Christmas. We attend Christmas concerts like the wonderful ones here in Aurora: The Carol of the Bells with the Alloy Horn Quartet, or the holiday concerts last weekend with the Fox Valley Orchestra or Orion Ensemble. We watch plays and movies like *A Christmas Carol*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, *Elf*, and my favorite *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. We look at festive light displays and watch children open presents. It’s all lovely to see and experience. But, I wonder what Mary would say.

Perhaps she would tell us that Christmas is not a spectator sport. Perhaps she would tell us that the proud won’t scatter themselves; the thrones of

¹ Kyle Roberts. *A Complicated Pregnancy*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017. pg. 198.

power won't topple themselves; those without food can't feed themselves; the world won't be made right by itself.

The Christ-coming, the Christmas that Mary dreamed, prophesied, sang on that long ago day with her cousin Elizabeth would be revolutionary! When was the last time Christmas felt *revolutionary* to you? Christmas is not a spectator sport for Mary that onlookers can just sit and watch and revel in, in the sights and sounds of the season. This event, this Advent, this Nativity changes everything. Everything.

But we—we will be tempted by the gentle carols, the bucolic creche, the warm lights and cozy fire and hypnotic smells of holiday baking—we will be tempted to *watch* Christmas happen. May Mary's song jolt us back to reality. May this oldest and most unsettling of Advent hymns smack us in the face, figuratively of course, and remind us that there is Christmas to be done. Work to be done. No spectators allowed. Amen.