

**4 Advent  
December 23, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

This morning Mary sings her song ... the Magnificat. Not once. Not twice. But three times ... first, as our Hymn of Praise at the beginning of the service. Again, as the canticle we recited between our first and second lessons. And, finally we hear Mary sing these subversive lyrics in the reading from the Gospel of Luke.

Mary. Mary, the Virgin Mother. Mary, the Mother of God ... *Theotokos* in Greek ... the “God-bearer.” This young woman named Mary has been buried under so many layers of theology, piety, and politics, she's nearly impossible to excavate. Some people pray to her. Others champion her as a model of holy femininity ... ever sinless, ever virgin, ever mother. To some, she is a child prophet extraordinaire. To others, the victim of divine manipulation. And, a fact that you may not know ... one of the longer chapters of the Quran is devoted entirely to Mary.

I think Luke's account of the Visitation gives us a portrait of Mary that cuts through most of our assumptions and stereotypes. The story of Gabriel's encounter with Mary gives us a nuanced portrait that balances fear with courage, doubt with faith, vulnerability with strength. Along the way, it gives us a portrait of ourselves ... of what we, the Church, might become at our very best.

This final Sunday in Advent is full of anticipation and hope. The themes of deliverance, fulfillment, promise and hope link all the lessons we heard read. The writers of the Book of the Prophet Micah, the Letter to the Hebrews, and the Gospel of Luke ... the readings for this Sunday ... all focus on the enfleshment of God. They are saying that God's saving work will come through humanity and history, not apart from it. They are saying that God will break into this world through the life of people like you and me.

The promise of this gift of salvation also signals vast implications for the entire reordering of human life. What Mary sings about are the forgotten, the grieving, the oppressed, the marginalized, the un-liberated and the disenfranchised who will find in God's new order an answer to their suffering and the reality of a new life of hope rather than despair.

You've heard me speak ... over and over again ... about the Jesus who turned the world upside down. Jesus taught an unconventional wisdom that stood in opposition and contrast to the conventional, and traditional, and the status quo. Our Advent season of anticipation of the Incarnation is full of contrary thinking and an upside-down world. The reading of the

Magnificat ... the Song of Mary ... the reading from Luke's gospel this morning ... is just the prelude.

Mary's song is so subversive in its cultural, socioeconomic and political implications, it has been banned a number of times in modern history. When the British ruled India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being sung in churches. In the same way, during the "Dirty War" in Argentina, after the mothers of disappeared children plastered the capital plaza with posters of the words of the Magnificat, the military junta banned all public displays of the song. Too much hope, they decided, is a dangerous thing.

Sometimes these Bible stories are so familiar that we listen to them without really hearing what they are saying. Remember, in Luke's gospel the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Elizabeth giving birth to a son in her old age, is intertwined with the story of Mary who is a young woman ... the Hebrew word that is here translated as "virgin" actually means "young woman." The contrast between the old and the young, and the turning upside down of the miraculous birth stories found throughout Hebrew Scriptures, would have been very evident to a first century listener to the story. Just like the story of Elizabeth, the story of Mary is ultimately about the birth of a baby, but that birth does not come through expected or established ways.

This portion of Luke's Gospel is about Mary's visit to the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah ... and Elizabeth's blessing of the child that Mary is carrying. And then Mary's response is to sing the Song of Mary ... the Magnificat. But it is more than just a song ... it is an early hymn that once again exemplifies a world turned upside down. The Magnificat is not just any song, but a radical, hope-drenched song that soars with promise for the world's poor, brokenhearted, and oppressed.

"My soul magnifies the Lord," Mary sings, and then her song goes on to do just that. To make more visible and clear ... to magnify for the world ... a God invested in revolutionary and lasting change for his creation. Mary describes a reality in which our sinful and unjust status quo is stunningly reversed: the proud are scattered and the humble honored. The hungry are fed and the wealthy one percent are sent away. The powerful are brought down, and those at the bottom of the ladder are lifted up. Mary describes a world reordered and renewed ... a world so beautifully characterized by love and justice, only the child she carries in her womb can birth it into being.

We live in a world where it is easier to buy an assault weapon than it is to acquire mental health services. Our government is in such chaos that it cannot function. Politicians who have secure incomes, generous pensions and excellent health care are protecting special interests at the expense of those who are unemployed, or who have a dwindling retirement portfolio, or who are ill and dying. In our own county, we have homeless men, women, and children seeking shelter, while developers build thousands of upscale homes on former farm land. When affordable housing is discussed in public those same developers defend their property with "Not In My Backyard." So, what happened to this world that was supposed to be turned upside down?

The prophet Micah tells us that from the little backwater town of Bethlehem, God can bring forth a Messiah. If this can happen, then so can the poor be fed. If a barren woman can conceive and bear a child in her old age, then certainly we should not give up on any of our hopes. If a young impoverished woman can be the mother of Jesus, then, as long as we are open to it, God can surprise us also. There is hope for the grieving, the dispossessed, and the marginalized, and those suffering under oppression. God can surprise us ... if we can open our hearts and souls to the birth of God's divine spirit within us ... just as that divine spirit came alive in Elizabeth and in Mary the mother of Jesus.

The Feast of the Incarnation is about the birth of Jesus. It is also about the divine coming to life in human form ... not only in Jesus, but in all of us as well. If we want to truly celebrate the Incarnation as the miracle it is, then we have to be ready to make room for the divine spark that lives in each of us to flourish to life, so that we become the very dreams and hopes that the prophets proclaim. It is through our humanity that we can make sure that the hungry are fed, that the grieving can find comfort, that the ill can find healing, that the homeless can find shelter, and that the disenfranchised can have a voice ... that the world as we know it, in some small way, can be turned upside down.

This is the Fourth Sunday of Advent. All four candles of our Advent wreath are now lit in anticipation of lighting the Christ candle in the center on Christmas Eve. Tomorrow evening ... as the sun is setting on Christmas Eve ... we will celebrate the Feast of the Incarnation. Look around you at the world you live in and imagine it turned upside down the way that Mary sings about. Open your hearts and souls to the divine spark to come alive and flourish the way it came alive in Jesus. Be ready to experience something holy and sacred taking hold of your life ... even if just for a moment ... so you might become the vessel of God's saving work in the world right here in our own homes, neighborhood, and city.

Amen.