

**December 13, 2020 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis. “Mary’s Joy”.**

Let us pray: Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us this day. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 1 verses 46-55. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

<sup>6</sup> And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

When I was in preschool, my preschool class put on a Christmas pageant, and I got to play the role of Mary. It was a very cute pageant, as you can imagine that any pageant with a bunch of 4-year-olds would be. But I wouldn’t say I learned much about Mary from the experience. She had no dialogue, and all I really did was walk up to the manger and then hold the baby Jesus.

But if I think back, that’s all I’ve ever really seen Mary portrayed as in Christmas pageants. Now I don’t mean to be too critical – most Christmas pageants that I’ve seen have been with kids and really the only speaking parts is the narration. But still – I think it’s important that for a lot of kids growing up – this is the only picture of Mary that they have. It was the only picture of Mary that I had growing up – just walking to the manger and holding a baby doll.

People sometimes struggle with understanding Mary, the mother of God, I know I do. What to make of her? Maybe that’s why most pageants jump straight to manger – leaving out the buildup, leaving out the story of how Mary got there.

Mary was a young, young girl when we meet her in the Gospel of Luke.

She was likely around 12 when she was engaged to Joseph, while Joseph would have been much older – as was the culture with most marriages at the time.

She came from an upper-class family – her relatives come from the priestly traditions.

And she was set to marry into an upper-class family with Joseph’s family having a royal background. But she was still a 12 year old girl in a world ruled and dominated by men.

And so, when she was 12 years old, the angel Gabriel comes to her and tells her that she has found favor God and will a bear son, the Son of the most high. And when Gabriel explains how this will happen to her – she accepts. She says, “here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.”

And from this reaction, she has understandably been called both submissive and confident. Both weak and strong. As Rev. Amy Allen writes, “How are we to understand this Mary? Is she weak—seeing no other alternatives, and so submitting to the will of the Almighty one? Or is she strong—willing to commit herself and her child to the pursuit of social and economic justice for Israel? Is she scared—overwhelmed by her pregnancy and working out her fear/awe toward the One who impregnated her? Or is she confident—boldly proclaiming her faith and trust in a merciful and steadfast God?”

And the truth is, we don’t really know what was going through her head when Gabriel came to her. We don’t know why she accepted the fate God gave her, but we do what she did next. She goes to see her relative Elizabeth as Gabriel tells her to do.

And when she gets there, she sings a song of praise. A song of Joy. Her very own Magnificat. And in this song of praise, she interprets the birth narrative – a narrative that hasn’t happened yet – she interprets it theologically. She tells us the significance of What God is about to do through Jesus Christ on earth.

And what follows in her song is nothing short of revolutionary reversals.

Five, to be exact. The first is Mary herself. “for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call be blessed; for the mighty one has done great things for me.” God is taking this young unmarried pregnant girl and making her blessed for generations to come.

The second reversal is for the prideful – god will scatter the prideful.

The third is the powerful – God will bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly.

The fourth is the hungry – God will fill the hungry and send the rich away with nothing.

And the last is for Israel herself. Israel, the subject of so much judgment from God – they will now be the recipient of God’s mercy. Through her song of Praise,

Mary tells us that God’s purpose will always turn the status quo upside down.

She is not bashful in announcing what may be summed as good news for the poor and downtrodden, and as very bad news indeed for those who up until now have wielded economic, political, and military power.

Hearing this, some 2000 years after Mary would have sung it, we must ask ourselves – does our reality match Mary’s song? Has the status quo been reversed? What would

it look like in our town, in our world – if we embraced the Magnificat? If the lowliest were lifted up?

This weekend, news of the execution of Brandon Bernard by lethal injection dominated the headlines because of last minute pushes by high profile lawyers and celebrities to delay the execution – saying evidence was withheld during his trial that would have helped lower his sentence to life, rather than death. It didn't work. Less than 24 hours later, another man was executed. Three more are planned within the next few weeks.

It's realities like these that make me grieve the message Mary's song of praise – a song that does not seem to be a reality today. For surely a world where the lowliest are lifted up and the rich walk away with nothing does not include government sanctioned execution. "For I was in prison and you visited me."

But that's just it about Mary's words in her song, and the theology they imply – it is as if she knows the kingdom of God is both here and yet to come. Parts of it break through yet injustices remain.

The reversal of the status quo, the lifting up of the lowly, has both happened and has yet to be fulfilled. She sings in the past tense but its tone, its movement points forward to the future.

On this advent Sunday, we celebrate joy – Mary's joy.

Her joy is in a world God turned upside down. A status quo reversed. This joy gives us hope – and allows us to praise God for what is and what is to come.

And it is a joy we can take part in – not only by singing with praise Mary's song, but by lifting up the lowliest, feeding the hungry, bringing the powerful down from their thrones, their offices – when we do these, we live Mary's joy, the joy of Christ.

One of my favorite depictions of Mary is Michelangelo's pieta.

It's a sculpture of Mary holding the body of the crucified Christ. It's beautiful and tragic, but it's also anatomically wrong. Christ's full adult body fits in her lap. Which should not be able to happen. But you don't really notice it right away – you have to look for it. It makes sense why Michelangelo would have done it this way – they both look beautiful and natural.

Perhaps this is how God reverses the status quo, just as Mary's song proclaims – in ways that look so natural you don't even notice until you are told. That maybe when we do strip the powerful, feed the hungry, lift up the lowly it doesn't feel so strange and foreign – it feels as natural as Mary holding her son.

Because making the Kingdom of God here on earth as it is heaven – is really coming home to God – sitting in the lap of the one who created us.

Mary is also depicted as very young in this sculpture – when she was likely in her 50s when Christ was crucified. But again, perhaps it's not totally wrong.

Just as 12 year old Mary sings of the theological impact of the word become incarnate in human flesh, a reality that is both here now but not yet fulfilled, perhaps, in a prophetic way, she is also holding the body of the crucified Christ – the fulfillment for the past, present, and all that is to come.

Scholars have long puzzled over the past tense on the lips of this pregnant young woman, who before giving birth speaks of her offspring's approaching mission as already accomplished – finished and done. Holding the body of the crucified Christ.

Mary's joy teaches us that theologically, Advent means this: when God announces the divine intention to act decisively in the incarnation of the Word, everything gets turned on its head. Maybe it does not matter whether Mary was submissive or confident, weak or strong, fearful or brave – maybe she was all those things.

What's important is that we don't only see her as a little girl silently holding a baby in a manger – we see her as a true disciple of Christ.

Boldly and joyfully prophesying what God is about to do and has yet already done: reversing the status quo, bringing down the rich and powerful and lifting up the hungry and lowly. And we need only to step into Mary's joy, the joy of Christ, and do the same

Thanks be to God. Amen.