

December 21: The Promise of Love (Luke 1:39-56)

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Welcome to our Advent series called God With Us: Advent Promises for a Just World. This month we're using a resource developed by the UMC General Commission on Religion and Race, a body that helps churches navigate complex questions related to racism, discrimination, and other forms of injustice that are part of our cultural fabric. As we move through the Advent season and wait with anticipation for the arrival of Jesus, we acknowledge that he is coming into a broken and divided world.

Before we jump into today's Scripture, I invite you to pray with me.

Light of the World, it's dark outside, and we're struggling with all that's heavy and wrong and unjust in our world and our community and ourselves. As I speak this morning, please open our eyes to your inbreaking light and fill our hearts with hope. Empower us with the confidence of Mary, and send us out as bearers of your light and your love in the world. Amen.

Happy Winter Solstice to you! Since June 20, we in the northern hemisphere have been progressively tilting away from the sun, and today – specifically, at 7:03 this morning – we reached the nadir of our collective journey into the darkness. That means that this is the shortest day of the year, and tonight will be the longest night – over 16 hours of darkness. How many of you feel that darkness in your body and your soul?

And it's not just meteorological darkness we're dealing with. National and international news over the past few weeks has been overshadowed with the darkness of mass shootings, murders, human trafficking, and political unrest. People are struggling economically, and it feels like injustice has been normalized. And then there's our own personal, family, and community struggles. There's been a lot of loss in this congregation over the past year, and I know that many of us are bowed down with the weight of grief, anxiety, or even anger.

And in the midst of all this, Christmas is coming, and no matter where we go, we are inundated with upbeat, festive music and cheer. And if you're sensing a disconnect between the jollity being thrust upon us and the darkness you sense around and within us, I want to encourage you, because you're actually doing the season of Advent right.

The season of Advent isn't traditionally about opening advent calendars filled with chocolates or beauty products or the 24 beers of Christmas. Advent is meant to be a season of penitence – that's why the color of advent is purple. It's a time for noticing and confessing what is wrong and broken in ourselves and in our world. It's a time for acknowledging the darkness while we focus our gaze on what has come and is coming: the *advent*, the arrival, the inbreaking of the light of Jesus, the light that cannot be overcome, the light that will return in full glorious power to make all wrong things right.

I'm going to focus on that light today by telling the story of two women who lived in dark times and sang bold songs about how God breaks in to keep promises and turn the world upside down. My hope is that we won't just hear their songs, but will be moved to make their songs our own.

I'll begin by taking us back about 3000 years to the Middle East, where the people of Israel were living in darkness. They had been without a righteous ruler or prophet for decades, and everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes, with terrible results. Tribes were fighting each other while enemy nations threatened, and the most vulnerable in the land were the ones that suffered most. God's people longed for stability and protection. And in the midst of this unsettled period of history there lived an "ordinary" woman named Hannah, who suffered her own personal anguish. She was married but unable to have children, and her heartache over her empty womb was intensified by the cruel taunting of her husband's second wife. In utter desperation, Hannah silently poured out her soul before the Lord.

And here's where the story takes a turn. 1 Samuel 1:19 says that the Lord remembered Hannah and gave her the desire of her heart, a healthy son she named Samuel; and in response, Hannah returned her gift to God. When Samuel was weaned, she took him to the house of worship and left him there, dedicating him to God's service for the rest of his life. As she presented her son to the Lord, Hannah again lifted up her soul in prayer – but this time, she wasn't silent. Her prayer, recorded in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, was public, powerful, and prophetic, and would echo through the ages.

Hannah began her prayer with praise for God's intervention in her own life, but very quickly expanded the scope of her praise to a wide, cosmic stage. She believed that what God did for her, a marginalized woman, wasn't just about her – it was a sign and a foretaste of what God does in the world. Hannah sang

of a mighty God who balances the scales of justice and turns the world's values upside-down, breaking the bows of the mighty while girding the feeble with strength; feeding the hungry while those who are full have to work for their food; and lifting up the poor and needy from the dust and giving them a seat of honor with princes. And then Hannah ended her prayer with this prophecy of a coming ruler: "the LORD...will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed" (1 Samuel 2:10).

Hannah's son Samuel grew up to be a great prophet who prepared the way for Israel's great king – under God's instruction, Samuel chose and anointed David, a shepherd boy after God's own heart who valued justice and tried to rule with righteousness – until he didn't. King David succumbed to the world's values of power, possession, and entitlement, and the kingdom he united split apart under his grandson's rule. The promises in Hannah's prayer, of the poor lifted up, the mighty humbled, of wrongs judged and righted, were not fulfilled by any of Israel's kings – instead, the divided kingdoms were conquered and despoiled. Their kings were dethroned and their people were scattered.

Around 1000 years after Hannah's bold song, the people of Israel were again living in dark times. Their land was in the grip of the powerful Roman Empire, and they regularly suffered the humiliations of foreign occupation. They lived in a world where injustice was normalized and it was dangerous to challenge power. They had been without a righteous ruler or prophet for decades, and they longed for deliverance. And in the midst of this unsettled period of history there lived two "ordinary" women, the cousins Elizabeth and Mary. Like Hannah, Elizabeth lived with the heartache of infertility.

And here's where the story takes another turn. God heard the prayers of Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, and gifted her with the desire of her heart: she became pregnant with a miracle baby who, like Samuel, would become a great prophet who prepared the way for God's anointed. But that wasn't all. Through the angel Gabriel, God also visited Mary, a young unmarried woman, and told her that she would conceive and bear a son who would inherit the throne of his ancestor King David. This miracle baby, Jesus, would reign forever, and his kingdom would have no end. With deep faith and courage, Mary said "yes" to God and became the one who would bring God himself, incarnate as a human baby, into the world to be with us.

The stage was set. God was on the move, and these two “ordinary” women were carrying God’s salvation plan for all creation into the world; literally bringing it to birth. So it’s no surprise that when they came together and caught sight of each other, a fire was sparked. The Holy Spirit flamed within them, and they both cried out with prophetic word.

Elizabeth went first. As Mary greeted her and her baby leaped for joy in her womb, she burst out with a blessing for Mary, Mary’s baby, and Mary’s bold faith, as well as amazement at her own blessedness: “Why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

And then Mary lifted up her voice to God with a powerful and prophetic song that echoed, remixed, and rewrote Hannah’s song from a millennium before. And just like Hannah’s song inspired Mary, Mary’s song has echoed through the ages, inspiring and energizing those who yearn for freedom and justice and look for light in the darkness.

Mary’s song is often called the Magnificat, the first word of its Latin translation; and like Hannah’s song, it starts with praise for what God personally did for Mary: looking on her with favor despite her “humble state” and doing great things for her.

But just like Hannah, Mary believed that what God did her for wasn’t just about her, and her song quickly moved from personal praise to how she saw God acting in the world. Mary sang of a God who was turning the world’s values of power and wealth upside down; who “has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts,” who “has brought down rulers from their thrones, and lifted up the humble”; who “has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:51-53).

Make no mistake, Mary’s song of praise was both subversive and revolutionary. A powerless, pregnant, unwed teenager under Roman rule was singing about the overthrow of empire and prophesying the downfall of rulers. Mary’s Magnificat was, and is, a manifesto from the margins. Mary didn’t just look forward to a future in which God would bring justice and freedom; she confidently claimed that because of what God was doing for her and through her, that future had already begun – God *has* scattered the proud, Mary sang, God *has* brought down rulers, God *has* filled the hungry with good things.

It's no wonder that Mary's Magnificat inspired the work of liberation and justice hundreds of years after she uttered it. Listen to these words from an Advent address by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1933, just a few months after he began his campaign of resistance to the Nazification of Germany:

The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings....This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the toppling of the thrones and the humiliation of the lords of this world, about the power of God.¹

The Magnificat is recognized as revolutionary and subversive not only by those who do the work of liberation, but also by oppressors who fear its power. During British rule in India, colonial authorities did not allow the words of the Magnificat to be read aloud in church because they saw them as a direct challenge to their rule. During the 1980's, the governments of both Guatemala and El Salvador banned Mary's song. And when the mothers of children who had disappeared during the "Dirty War" in Argentina started posting the Magnificat on placards through the capital's Plaza de Mayo, the military junta outlawed any public display or singing of Mary's words.

To sing Mary's song is to ally ourselves with the marginalized and the humble and the hungry, and against those who wield oppressive power over them; and if we really believe the words she spoke, they will lead to action.

This is the Sunday that we light the advent candle of love and focus on the advent promise of love, and so far in this sermon, I haven't used the word "love" once. But I've been talking about love all the way through, because love isn't just a word or a feeling. Love is action, action that values the one who is loved and works for their flourishing. Philosopher and activist Cornel West said in a 2011 speech that "justice is what love looks like in public."² And even though Hannah and Mary didn't use the word "love" in their songs, love is infused into them, from the personal to the political. Love is when God saw Hannah and Elizabeth's pain and remembered them, giving them the desire of their hearts. Love is when God "helped his servant Israel," even after Israel turned from him

¹ <https://renovare.org/articles/my-spirit-rejoices>

² <https://www.facebook.com/reel/10155292829161387>

again and again and again, “remembering to be merciful...just as he promised” our spiritual ancestors – because love keeps its promises, no matter what. Love is when God looked on Mary with favor and chose her, a powerless young woman, to be in the very center of God’s plan to save and heal the world. Love is God breaking into our darkness and brokenness, not with coercive force, but as a marginalized human being, in solidarity with us. And love will finally bring down the powerful and lift up the humble, overturning all systems of oppression in order to bring freedom and justice for all.

John 3:16 says that God so loved the world, the *cosmos*, that he sent his one and only son to be with us. The Magnificat reminds us of both the personal and the cosmic scope of God’s love, incarnate in Jesus Christ. This advent season, we are invited to make Mary’s song our own, and I have three thoughts about what that means for us.

First, making Mary’s song our own means making her confidence our own – confidence that even when the darkness around us seems to press in, God’s light has broken into our world, and will break in again. During the season of advent we look towards two arrivals – we look back 2000 years ago to the advent of Jesus, God-with-us, who took his divine love into the very depths of our darkness and arose victorious. And we look forward to the advent yet to come, when Jesus will return to complete the promise that Hannah and Mary sang about; when he will finally overturn all oppression, establish perfect justice and peace, heal creation, and make all things well.

In the meantime, though, we live between those two advents. Jesus’ light has broken into our world, it’s at work among us, and it cannot be overcome. But darkness remains - it’s not yet eradicated. We still suffer its effects, and sometimes it does seem to be winning.

Remember that today is winter solstice. Since 7:03 this morning, we have begun to tilt back towards the sun, but it’s going to take a long time to really notice that the light is growing. For me, February always feels like the longest month rather than the shortest, a tedious slog through gloomy and dispiriting weather. And yet, throughout February, we are inexorably tilting more and more towards the sun. No matter how many dark, damp days February holds for us, it can’t stop the light from growing. The light always wins.

That's where I see us in God's big story right now – smack in the middle of February. Even when it feels like the gloom will never end, the tide has turned. Christmas has arrived, and we're on the other side of the solstice. The Sun of Righteousness has broken into our world, with healing in his wings, and we are inexorably tilting towards the light of justice and peace and healing. Mary's defiant song, the words of God that she prophesied, will not return empty.

In the meantime, thought, we need to cultivate eyes that see the light that is here, to notice where it has already broken through the darkness. Even in the middle of a ten-day forecast of rain, there are always moments where the gloom lifts and the you can see a bit of blue sky. And when we open our eyes and hearts to where God's light is shining here and now, we will begin see it more and more. We shouldn't look for it up top, though, where people hold the reins of power – because that kind of power doesn't last. The light of peace and justice and love and healing that pushes back the darkness is almost always active down low, among “humble” people like Mary and Elizabeth and Hannah and you and me – that's how God works in our world.

And that brings me to my final thought about making Mary's song our own. Mary was chosen to carry God's light and love into the world, and so are we. Obviously, not in the physical way that Mary birthed the baby Jesus into the world – that was a one-time event. But we, as Jesus followers, are filled with the Holy Spirit of God, and we carry and grow the Fruit of the Spirit. When we live out that countercultural fruit in our world, when we engage in intentional acts of love, when we stand up for justice, when we lay down our privilege for the sake of another, when we ally ourselves with the marginalized and oppressed and hungry and work for their flourishing, we orient ourselves to the prophetic message of Mary's song, and we follow in her courageous and faithful footsteps. We are chosen to bear God's light in the world.

I'm going to invite Marly to close this sermon, because while I was writing it, I discovered a new version of the song “Mary, Did You Know?” with lyrics by Jennifer Henry and inspired by Mary's Magnificat, and it moved me deeply. Marly's going to sing this new version, and as you listen, I invite you to notice what stirs in you. If you'd like to explore the lyrics more closely, you can listen to the song using the link in Friday's newsletter, or download this sermon from the church website – the lyrics will be at the end. May the defiant faith and confidence of Mary's song become our own. Amen.

*"Mary, Did You Know?" is a Christmas song with lyrics written by Mark Lowry in 1984 and music written by **Buddy Greene** in 1991. These new lyrics are by Jennifer Henry, an activist, theologian, and strategist with the United Church of Canada. <https://jenniferhenry.ca>*

Mary did you know,
that your ancient words
would still leap off our pages?
Mary did you know,
that your spirit song
would echo through the ages?
Did you know that your holy cry
would be subversive word,
that the tyrants would be trembling
when they know your truth is heard?

Mary did you know,
that your lullaby
would stir your own Child's passion?
Mary did you know,
that your song inspires
the work of liberation?
Did you know that your Jubilee
is hope within the heart
of all who dream of justice,
who yearn for it to start?

The truth will teach, the drum will sound, healing for the pain
The poor will rise, the rich will fall. Hope will live again.

Mary did you know,
that we hear your voice
for the healing of the nations?
Mary did you know,
your unsettling cry
can help renew creation?
Do you know, that we need your faith,
the confidence of you,
May the God that you believe in,
be so true.