

"An Advent Song"

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In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

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

(Luke 1:39-55)

I can remember the first time I stood in front of one of my most favorite paintings, one that I had studied for years. Wandering through the hallways of the Louvre, I was stopped in my tracks when I saw it. This painting, created by Leonardo da Vinci, was one of those works of art that tied my worlds together. As I was studying in college, dancing between working as an artist and in Museum Education, while at the same time discerning God's call in my life, there were moments when I saw it all come together. This painting, called Virgin of the Rocks, is visual theology on a canvas. In the painting, you see four figures, sitting in a mysterious rocky landscape. Your eyes are first drawn to the central figure, a gentle, serene looking Mary. Below her sit two infants, John the Baptist and Jesus, and beside them is an angel. It is the gestures of these figures that makes the theological statement. There are no halos to mark that they are holy, but Mary's hand is held protectively above Jesus' head, hovering above him in such a way as if to say this is the one, this is the one that you are looking for. Mary's other arm is around young John the Baptist who kneels before Jesus holding his hands in a gesture of prayer. Jesus, looking at John the Baptist, holds his small hand up in a gesture of blessing. The angel that sits on the other side of Jesus is the only one in the painting who looks ever so slightly out toward the viewer, inviting us into the scene. She points to John the Baptist, as if to say, watch this one, this is the one who will point to Jesus, and he is the one who will show us the way.

This painting has almost everything right, except for maybe its depiction of Mary. We often think of Mary as gentle, meek, and mild. Most of the hymns we sing support that idea. But listen again to today's story and ask any woman who has born a child and it's hard to think that this description is correct. Here's a young, unwed woman who has received unbelievable news, visited by an angel and told she will bear the Son of God. That was not



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how the life plan was supposed to go and I can appreciate the humanity in today's story. After receiving such life-changing news, Mary goes to visit family, her relative Elizabeth, a wise, older woman who also is to bear a child. It makes sense that Mary would go to find comfort and solace from someone who is walking in similar footsteps. That is how good community starts after all. And we are told that she went with haste to find it. No sooner does Mary walk in Elizabeth's front door does she receive what she hoped to find. Elizabeth, after feeling John the Baptist's baby kicks, has a prophecy because of God's spirit, saying to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Perhaps Da Vinci remembered this scene from scripture when creating that painting. This is the theology that Da Vinci paints so beautifully. Though the painting does not feature Elizabeth, it does show the connection between John the Baptist and Jesus. Today's passage says that upon Mary's greeting, the baby leapt in Elizabeth's womb. Even before they were born John the Baptist is aware of Jesus' significance. It's the first interaction between the messenger and the message. And feeling this, Elizabeth proclaims the words that will give Mary the comfort, confirmation, and support that she needed to believe the news that the angel had told her. Trust the preacher's wife to be able to confirm such a prophecy. Elizabeth, married to the priest, Zechariah, also received unimaginable news that she would bear a child, despite her old age, past the time when someone could not even fathom having a child. Feeling her baby kick, she is filled with the Holy Spirit and like a prophet she names the role that Mary is to play, to be the mother of the son of her Lord, proclaiming what Mary has not even yet told her. And that prophecy is also partnered with a blessing, "blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Mary is blessed not only by being the mother to the Son of God, but for her trust in God's promise. Elizabeth gives us all an exemplary lesson in how to play the host through her interaction.

Even though Mary's social status as an unwed, pregnant mother should have brought her shame, instead Elizabeth greets her with honor and joy. She shows the same sort of welcoming, inclusive love that would later be the foundation of Jesus' ministry. She sees beyond the shameful of Mary's situation to see the redemptive reality of God's love that reaches especially to those whom society excludes, rejects, and looks down on. Elizabeth's greeting and welcome invites us all to look for the ways that God chooses to act in our world, and to ask ourselves if we are part of that work? Are we being welcoming hosts for those in our society who are on the margins? Where are we working to share God's love with people in and beyond our neighborhood who are excluded or treated as shameful by others, or even by ourselves? Will our ears and hearts be open to the Spirit's nudging when the bearers of God's new reality comes to our doorstep? Will we be a hospitable community for those who come seeking encouragement, comfort, and confirmation of God's promises?

Elizabeth's prophetic witness encourages and strengthens Mary, and in doing so Mary is able to lift her voice and proclaim the wonders of God's work throughout history. Called the Magnificat, Mary's song is one that sings of God's work that not only redeems the generations, but it flips the notions of power and greatness up on its head. Elizabeth is the tuning fork to help Mary find the pitch to sing her song. In her song Mary's rhythm is joy as she sings of God's work of restoration. As she sings about the future birth of her son, she sings about what God has already done- the proud have been humbled, the powerful have brought down from their thrones, those who have had enough of their share have been sent away and those who are hungry have been welcomed to the table. The powers that be, those

of greed, oppression and violence, are overthrown with God's power and the measures of God's kingdom- mercy, justice, and love.

Like those in the Bible who have similarly sang about God's victory, Mary's song proclaims that God has fulfilled the promises made to the prophets and Israel to send a different kind of ruler. She sings of God's faithfulness saying, "God has helped Israel in remembrance of God's mercy according to the promise he made to our ancestors to Abraham and to his descendants." Like all prophets before her, her song is a vision of a world where God will bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly like herself and Elizabeth. She is lifting her voice to join the chorus that has been sung throughout the ages; it was the song of Miriam and Moses, the song of the psalmists, the song of Hannah. It is a song for anyone who has proclaimed God's goodness, even in the midst of difficult times. It is the song anyone has sung in the darkness of night trusting that daybreak will come.

The beauty of Mary's song is that her words ring out in a time that is seemingly full of chaos and insecurity. Despite all the uncertainty that Mary faces, she is able to sing a song of praise. In a time of expectant waiting, she sings a song of mercy, justice, and love and she sings it with such assurance and promise. In this season of Advent, we have had our own waiting to do as we journey toward Christmas morning. Some of us wait with joyful exuberance; some wait anxiously, some wait with deep grief. Our waiting is held with both memories and hope and it is done with eyes open to the world around us. What would your song, your Magnificat, sound like today? What have you seen God doing that causes you to lift your voice? What are the places in the world, in our community, in your life, where a song like this is needed?

To sing the Magnificat today would be just as revolutionary and powerful as when Mary sang it. When we turn on the evening news and see all the disconnection, distrust, and violence, the reaction of our hearts is to sink, to worry, not to be lifted with joy. When we encounter the needs of this world, for our neighbors who sleep on the streets or children who don't have enough to eat, our souls are not filled with hope and faith, but with uneasy despair. When we find ourselves unexpectedly worrying over the health of a loved one or even our own health, our first reaction is not often to sing a song of praise. When we feel overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of the season, struggling to reach the appropriate level of cheer, is this the song we could join in singing, one that longs for a different way? We yearn for the mercy and justice that Mary sings of, and thankfully she helps us to find our voice. In this season of Advent, we sing 'Come Thou Long Expected Jesus' or 'O Come, O Come Emmanuel.' Our yearning hearts and voices are lifted in prayer and praise for the coming of Christ, Emmanuel, God with us. At the end of this service today we will lift our voices together to sing a hymn that speaks of the world turning, and it names the same upheavals by God that Mary sings of in her Magnificat. It is a hymn that sings of a God who is not only great, but good, and its chorus boldly proclaims, "my heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn."

These are the words that we will be invited to sing together, on this last Sunday of Advent, when our Advent hymns will soon become the joyous songs and sounds of Christmas morning, when our quiet "O Come, O Come Emmanuel's will become jubilant refrains of Joy to the World. This is the gift of song. Music invites us all to find a way in- whether through songs of joy and peace, or of lament and pain, songs of courage or hope, or praise and thanksgiving. Music gives us words even we cannot find any of our own. And today may we

find comfort, reassurance, and power in Mary's words. My soul magnifies the Lord, she sings, and while other translations say her soul glorifies, or exalts or praises the Lord, that word magnify is important. It is called the Magnificat after all. Mary's life magnifies God. Like a magnifying glass, Mary makes larger the mighty acts and redemptive works of God. Through her we are able to more clearly see who God is, making God easier for us all to see. As followers of Christ, as those who wait and long for Emmanuel, God with Us, this is our job as well, especially in this season of Advent. Mary's song reminds us to go beyond just praise of God, but to make sure that our lives are magnifying God. When people look at us, when they look through the lens of our lives, do they see God more clearly?

I have the great joy of living with a person who is obsessed with telescopes, and galaxies, and all things outer space. Sure there are times when you can hear me muttering and complaining around the house as yet another telescope has taken up some valuable square footage, but I forget these frustrations when I am invited out in the dead of night to look up and see the craters of the moon, the rings of Saturn, or the cloudy gases of nebulas. I have learned some things about telescopes, as Chris has fallen deeper and deeper into this hobby. One, is that every theologian needs a telescope. Indeed there is no greater feeling of God's grandeur than looking through a lens up to see and remember just how small of a dot we are in this ever-expanding universe. And two, it's all about the light that's magnified. When people talk about telescopes and how much or how far you are able to see, people think they are talking about power and the more powerful the telescope the more you will be able to see. But the more power that you have, the more the distant object will just get blurry. Instead, the real power of a telescope has everything to do with how much light it can collect and magnify with its mirrors. The more light collected means things that are not visible all of a sudden become visible. A seemingly dark patch of sky, when seen through a telescope with many light collecting mirrors, reveals thousands of stars.

As people of faith each one of us is a light collector so that our souls might magnify God's goodness. We are called to be gatherers of God's light, and to magnify God's light into the world. We adjust and put God in focus as live out our faith in ways that welcome the stranger, fill the hungry with good things, and lift up the lowly. We find that through all this we can glimpse the image of God more clearly than we previously could. God starts to be made visible in places which previously seemed empty, though it turns out God was there the whole time. As we prepare to light the Christ candle tomorrow and to see the Advent wreath full of light, might you magnify that light and carry it out into the world, so that you magnify God. And in that calling may all of our lives be a song that sings of God's power and promise. Thanks be to God. Amen.