

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

For a lot of people, including me, Mary's story is the high point of the Advent season. And we usually hear it on the last Sunday of the season, which is today.

¹The church has had an interesting relationship with, and understanding of, Mary throughout the centuries. Some people pray to her. Others ignore her. Some call her the "God-bearer." And still others lift her up as a model of holy femininity. To some, she is a child prophet. To others, she's the victim of divine manipulation.

There are so many layers of theology, politics, and devotion covering her that we sometimes forget she was an actual person.

²But Luke's gospel gives us a portrait of Mary that cuts through most of our assumptions and stereotypes. It balances fear with courage, doubt with faith, and vulnerability with strength.

In the verses leading up to our reading this morning is the Anunciation – the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary announcing that God has chosen her to bear the Messiah.

³Tradition tells us that Mary is only thirteen or fourteen years old when Gabriel appears to her. At that time in history, as a girl, she had no power or rights. Because she wasn't married, her pregnancy was a scandal. At best, her situation would have made her the object of gossip. And at worst, it placed her at risk of death by stoning.

And Mary knew all that. So, when she said, "Yes," she knew what she was doing. It wasn't a passive answer. She reminds us that she was a flesh and blood human being – an ordinary girl from an unimportant place. One who had agency, and a say in what happened to her and her body.

And we are told that right after Gabriel leaves, Mary runs "with haste" until she reaches the home of her cousin, Elizabeth, who is also pregnant.

She didn't isolate herself. She didn't keep God's revelation a secret. She sought community. And in Elizabeth, she found safety, affirmation, empathy and companionship. She found someone who recognized, nurtured, deepened, and celebrated the work of God in her life.

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2034-a-visit-and-a-song>

² Ibid

³ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2034-a-visit-and-a-song>

And when Mary received those things, she burst into song.

It wasn't one that was new – she'd heard the words while growing up because they'd been sung throughout history by her ancestors. And it most closely echoes the song of Hannah, Samuel's mother.

And like Hannah, when Mary sang, she sang of God's activity and presence in the world and in her life – and the way her life had been blessed by God and that it would make God's presence visible in the world.

She also sang of God's mercy and that she, an ordinary girl, received it.

Mercy is often defined as kind or forgiving treatment of someone who could be treated harshly; it's also kindness or help given to people who are in a very bad or desperate situation. It's interwoven with forgiveness and grace, and it's what Mary needed most at that time in her life.

All of these things – safety, affirmation, empathy; nurturing, deepening, and celebrating the work of God. Extending mercy. All of these things are in the job description of the church. A place that is expected to be a place where people seek each other out with trust and openness. Where we receive people who are marginalized and vulnerable with tenderness.

A place that extends mercy because the people in it recognize they have received mercy, and know how life-changing it is.

When a church, a faith community, lives into the qualities that Mary sings of – God is magnified. God works through the people, and is made visible and clear to the world. A God that is gracious and merciful to people who don't typically receive grace and mercy.

A God who lifts up people that have been cast aside, and feeds people who are hungry, and who remembers promises made from generation to generation. A God who, quite frankly, isn't very popular in some circles in our country today.

The political rhetoric that is dominant belittles things like mercy and compassion. One or two people have even said that empathy is a sin. But it isn't the first time in history that this has happened.

When the British ruled India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being sung in churches.

In the 1980's, Guatemala's government discovered Mary's words about God's preferential love for the poor to be too dangerous and revolutionary because they inspired the poor in Guatemala to believe that change was possible. So, the government banned any public recitation of Mary's words.

And during the "Dirty War" in Argentina, when the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo placed Mary's words on posters throughout the capital plaza after their children disappeared, the military junta banned all public displays of the song. They decided that too much hope is a dangerous thing.

But this is the God we worship. This is the God that Jesus made flesh.

⁴And theologian Debie Thomas reminds us that "too much hope" is precisely what we're called to cultivate and proclaim on this fourth and final Sunday in Advent. She goes on to say that the promise of the Messiah's lasting reign changes everything.

That there is no unjust system, oppressive hierarchy, or arrogant leadership structure that God will not upend. No promise God will fail to keep. No broken [or] exploited life that God will not save.

I've said this before, but Mary's song isn't a lullaby. It never has been. We love its message, but it isn't good news for people who like the status quo and who benefit from it.

When we sing it, most of us sing from a place of privilege. We recognize that we aren't the ones who are at risk. But we sing hope on their behalf. We sing recognizing our place as God's people and our responsibility to magnify God in the world.

⁵We sing these words recognizing that the world God wants might make us uncomfortable. Because it's a world in which the status quo is reversed. A world that is reordered and renewed. A world that is characterized by God's love and justice. One that is brought into being through Christ.

When we sing these words, we recognize that God opens our hearts so that we can speak the truth about the way things are. And listen to one another, and dream and work together toward the future and the world God wants for us.

And recognize the need for this openness and willingness in our world, and especially in our own nation.

⁴ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2034-a-visit-and-a-song>

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As a church, as a faith community, when we sing Mary's song – when we live into the qualities it proclaims – God is magnified. God works through us and we become a place where people seek each other out with trust and openness. We receive people who are marginalized and vulnerable with tenderness.

We practice empathy and compassion. We extend mercy. And God becomes visible to the world.

When we sing Mary's song, we remind ourselves and the world that “too much hope” is what God is about – in this and every season. That the God who has been active in our world from the beginning and throughout history will never stop working until the world is characterized by God's love and justice.

Thanks be to God! Amen.