

Hope Is Worth the Risk

Dec. 22, 2024 Fourth Sunday of Advent

Series: *Words for the Beginning: Advent Reminders for New Seasons*

Luke 1:46-55, Matthew 1:18-20

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Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

Matthew 1:18-20

*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 Sarah

and to his descendants forever."

Luke 1:46-55

Historically, Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been held up as a role model for women. In order for her to be the role model that suited the purposes of culture, however, she's been reinvented as meek, mild, and passive. The flowing, modest blue robe, downcast eyes, covered head. That Mary bears very little resemblance to the Mary in Luke.

The angel Gabriel has told Mary that she will bear a child. Gabriel then explains that Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, is also expecting. Elizabeth is "getting on in years," so this, too, is extraordinary news. "In haste," Luke says, Mary goes to see her.

When Elizabeth greets Mary, her unborn child recognizes Mary's unborn child, and turns a joyful somersault. As I mentioned last Sunday, Elizabeth's unborn son will grow up to be John the Baptist. The message we're to take from this is that even before they were born, John the Baptist, as well as his mother Elizabeth, heralded the coming of Jesus. Elizabeth exclaims that Mary and her unborn child are blessed, and then Mary begins to sing.

We know her song as the Magnificat, named after the first word of the song in Latin. Biblical scholars tell us that these words are not original with Mary. The song is remarkably similar to Hannah's song in the Hebrew scriptures – Hannah was the mother of the prophet Samuel.

And as Rev. Joanne Whitt writes - And what a song it is! William Willimon tells the story of a college student explaining to him that the virgin birth is just too incredible to believe. Willimon responded, "You think that's incredible, come back next week. Then, we will tell you that 'God has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.' We'll talk about the hungry having enough to eat and the rich being sent away empty. The virgin birth? If you think you have trouble with the Christian faith now, just wait. The virgin birth is just a little miracle; the really incredible stuff is coming next week."

In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor executed by the Nazis, the Magnificat is "the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung. 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 collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary's mouth."

I wonder, if they really gave it some attention, whether more American Christians, or Christians generally, would have a harder time with the story of the virgin birth, or with this song of Mary's. Mary's song blesses God for the victory won over the proud, powerful, and rich for the sake of the lowly and the hungry. This is not a sweet soprano solo. One commentator says it's more like Janis Joplin.

It is about a powerful hope for the world, a different ordering rooted in deep love and grace, justice and shalom.

Although it is a radical song, Biblical scholar Sharon Ringe notes that a leveling, rather than reversal, is what Luke intends here, as God's action moves us to a common middle ground, to a world where winner takes all is transformed into one in which all have a place at the table.

This is risky to believe this, to lean into this, to have faith we are called to live into this vision. But hope is worth the risk.

Hope is vulnerable and can feel like a tremendous risk, especially if you've experienced loss or trauma. But Mary shows us a resilient hope that takes risks—she risks her body to bear a son who will become the hope of her people. Similarly, Joseph makes a risky choice to stay with Mary; dismissing her quietly would have kept him safe. But instead, he

chooses hope. He chooses to trust the angel, and it makes all the difference. It can feel safer and easier to be a cynic, but the world doesn't need more cynics. It needs people who say, "It can be better," and make it so.

Author Barbara Kingsolver said in a speech, "The very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope." What do we do with hope? How do we live inside it? What are some ways wellness are connected to living inside hope?

On the Fourth Sunday in Advent: Can we hear Mary's song as good news for all people, not just for some, but for all? Can we truly hear that lifting up the lowly and bringing down the powerful is good news, even for us? Can we hear it as a song of hope?

Can we seek out images and descriptions of Mary that reflect this song of transformation and hope for the world? A turning? I love this image of Mary by artist Kelly Latimore entitled Mary: Love Forever Being Born.

We certainly want to hear some good news. In the sentimental glow of the season, it's easy to forget that when the angels sang about good news of great joy for all people, what they meant is this: God wants justice, peace, and well-being – shalom – for everybody, and so God comes to us in a vulnerable baby born to non-white, non-English-speaking, non-Christian, nobody parents in a backwater village in the Middle East, in a stable surrounded by mess and bad smells, with "no crib for a bed," and the first people to hear about it, those shepherds out on a hillside, are the kind of people you'd never invite to dinner and you'd pray your daughter wouldn't marry.

Which means that God can reach everyone; anywhere at any level, even when things are messy, or all messed up; even when our best laid plans go awry; even when we find ourselves at the bottom of the heap, whatever heap we're in. It means it is just like God to be at work in uncelebrated or unexpected ways in other times and places, too.

Even in us. How might Mary's song open us up to a deep hope?

Close with a contemporary version of the Magnificat
A modern interpretation from enfleshed: (adapted)

My soul is alive with thoughts of God.
What a wonder, the Holy One's liberating works.
Though the world has been harsh to me,
God has shown me kindness,
seen my worth,
and called me to courage.

Surely, those who come after me will call me blessed.
Even when my heart weighs heavy with grief,
still, so does hope abide with me.
Holy is the One who makes it so.
From generation to generation,
Love's Mercy is freely handed out.
None are beyond the borders of
God's transforming compassion.
The power of God is revealed
among those who labor for justice.

God humbles the arrogant,
turns unjust thrones into dust.
Holy Wisdom is revealed in
the lives and truths of those on the margins.
God is a feast for the hungry.
God is the great re-distributor of wealth and resources.
God is the ceasing of excessive and destructive production
that all the earth might rest.

Through exiles and enslavement,
famines and wars,
hurricanes and gun violence,
God is a companion in loss,
a deliverer from evil,
a lover whose touch restores.
This is the promise God made
to my ancestors,
to me,
to all the creatures and creations,
now and yet coming,
and in this promise,
I find my strength.
Come, Great Healer, and be with us. Amen.

This sermon included content from our Advent 2024 materials published by A Sanctified Art
<https://sanctifiedart.org/words-for-the-beginning-advent-bundle>
Rev. Joanne Whitt, Magnificat, December 16, 2024, solve by walking blog
<https://solve-by-walking.com/2024/12/16/magnificat->
Rev. M Jade Kaiser, Modern Magnificat, enfleshed.com
<https://enfleshed.com/project/magnificat/>