

Jordan Station United Church

December 19, 2021

Advent 4: Love

Rev. Anita Spiller

Sermon based on Luke 1:39-56

"Mary Sings with Love!"

My thanks to Karoline Lewis, Betty Radford Turcott and for the women of my prayer group for their words of wisdom that have found their way into this sermon. It is my voice and theirs that has produced this reflection on Mary's journey towards Christmas and I am deeply grateful for the imagination of all women who can identify with what it means to be a woman without a voice in this world.

If there was a more important time to hear Mary's words, I do not know when that would be. My prayer for today is that we hang on every word, every sentence, every turn of phrase of this incredible song of praise. Mary's song is our sermon. A sermon to be told in our time and our place. Truth be told, we could take any line in the Magnificat and preach a whole sermon on that one phrase, that one truth, that Mary's world needed to experience and that our world desperately needs to hear. But especially hear these words, "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."

Advent holds many themes of hope, peace, love and joy, but the witness of Mary reminds us that Advent is also about God's promise of mercy. I need that right now. Remembrance of God's mercy. Can we even recall what it feels like to know mercy? To feel mercy toward ourselves and to others? To extend mercy? Well, even if we can't, God does. There's the promise. Thank you, Mary for reminding us that God give us mercy.

According to Merriam-Webster, mercy is "kind or forgiving treatment of someone who could be treated harshly; it is kindness or help given to people who are in a very bad or desperate situation."

Karoline Lewis had this to say about this week passage and I quote, "Wow, is mercy ever hard to come by these days. Yet, here's Mary. And I suspect that not much mercy was ever extended to her. For all intents and purposes, she should have been overlooked, even rejected. She was a girl and a poor

one at that. She had no voice and no standing in her community. She should have been dismissed from her community, distrusted, disbelieved, and doubted. She should have been silenced, separated out as one not worthy of God's love, let alone one trusted to testify to God's love for the least in the world. Which is why in her song she must give witness to how much God's mercy matters, what difference it makes, for her. In her case, it meant that instead of being ignored and rejected, she was seen and regarded with love. She was cared for and called. She was lifted up and because she was, so also all of the lowly will know that promise, too. This is also God's promise -- that those we would assume are "against" God are remarkable witnesses for God. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." I wonder what the world would be like if more people responded to God's interruption in their lives like Mary did."

Because Mary models the kind of reaction we should have to divinity's disturbance in our lives. She wonders and ponders. She questions and considers. She answers in awe. And Mary's reply to God's call understands that fear is characteristic of our response to God when God disrupts our lives.

But Mary knows her God. And only a few verses later, she will testify to the God she's always known -- the God who shows mercy for those who fear God; who scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; who brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly; who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty; who remembers Abraham and all of his descendants, which now include her, forever. And, now, more than ever, Mary knows who her God is. She knows what her God has done -- for her, for her cousin Elizabeth, for the outcast, the overlooked, those discarded, disenfranchised, dismissed.

In other words, she doesn't view this angel thing as business as usual. She gets that God is God and cannot be predictable. She doesn't attempt to control God for her own gain. She doesn't say, "Well, that's interesting, but no thanks. I have other plans." She doesn't figure out how to maneuver God for her own benefit. She doesn't censor, blame, or lie.

And Mary would never assume God is on her side. She would never presume to speak for God. She would never suppose that she could regulate the will of God. And she certainly would never imagine that she could determine what God might do next.

I have a longing for the days pre-pandemic when I could be out in the community with God's people. I long for community meals that bring together people to share conversation, a meal and sanctuary...even just for a few hours. A few years ago, I met Mary at just such an event. I met Joseph and Elizabeth, the Inn Keeper and his wife. I met Jesus and the disciples. I met a whole host of people that for me, represented a microcosm of our planet. I had the joy of volunteering at the Village of Hope Annual Christmas dinner. I had the honour of helping to greet and serve over 300 guests who live in our community of Lincoln. They were very old and very young. The youngest being just 2 weeks old. Oh, what a joy to embrace a newborn baby in this season of waiting. I had the joy of being a witness to a community responding to the needs of those who would have otherwise been forgotten during Christmas. There was food...a bounty of food. A turkey dinner with all the trimmings served with love and respect. There were gifts given by Santa. There was hope and the excitement in the eyes of children. There was a little girl, probably five years old who I heard say to her Mom..."Look Mom...there she is!" There she is, was a baby alive doll. Clearly the only thing she was dreaming about this Christmas. I cried as she walking away clutching the baby as the relief washed over her mother's eyes knowing that this year...her daughter's Christmas wish was granted.

I witnessed mercy when an elderly woman was helped to the table by a volunteer carrying food because her arthritis was SO bad, she couldn't walk and carry her food at the same time.

And I met Mary, our Mary, the expectant mother and her four-year-old daughter that you sponsored with your gifts from our baby shower. Remember that year, when the tree was overflowing with donations in celebration of a new born baby? I met a beautiful family who was full of grace and thanksgiving for all that she had been given. She was due on January 6th and I remember praying that when her baby arrived that the light of Epiphany would shine into her world. She didn't know who I was because it didn't matter but I was filled with overwhelming love when I watched a local firefighter help her to the car with the bounty of gifts that you had given. Knowing that you had responded and are continuing to fight for justice for the poor and displaced in our small town.

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, Mary reminds us of what it looks like and what it sounds like when God shows up in your life -- unannounced, unexpected, and unplanned. And this is an important reminder as this season of Christmas begins. It is a season after all. It begins in the wee hours of Christmas morning with the birth of the Christ Child and takes us

through until Epiphany on January 6th. 12 amazing days to once again celebrate the coming of the Christ child,

If we are looking for models of ministry in our modern times, we don't need to look any further than Mary and Elizabeth. On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, with Christmas only six days away, the meaning of Advent has the potential to slip away. Waiting for a birth that will turn the world upside-down demands pre-emptive action -- that is what is at the heart of the Advent season. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to embrace this Advent season. Your patience in not rushing towards the birth but waiting in anticipating of what is to come. For labouring with me through the weeks of feeling homesick, laying the foundation of peace and hearing John's message that there is a home for all. More than just characters in the story leading up to Christmas, Mary shows us what it looks like when you realize that your life is about to change.

You can't put off the implications of Christmas. You can't defer its significances. You can't postpone how it will affect your life. You simply must live as if it is true now. This is what we witness in Mary. She realizes the blessings that are about to arrive alter everything about the here and now. She believes that when God fulfills God's promises, no matter when that fulfillment happens, that truth makes a difference now. The truth that she is longing for sanctuary and the realization that God is anywhere God's love dwells freely and abundantly.

Mary in whom God has found favor, returns that favor. Even though she does not yet grasp the fullness of that favor, even though she does not yet realize the magnitude of God's regard for her, Mary knows enough to act on it -- and she can hardly wait to do so.

"This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people" (Luke 1:25) and so Elizabeth welcomes her relative, Mary, who finds herself disgraced as an unmarried pregnant woman. "Nothing will be impossible with God" and so Mary testifies that because she has been favored, one whom the world would overlook, God will favor the lowly, lift up the marginalized, and do great things for those society casts aside.

The Advent difference means even before that for which we wait arrives, we don't wait to live out its truth. Advent helps us recognize that our response to Christmas cannot wait. Advent reminds us that when Christmas is "over" our work is just getting started -- and should have already started.

As a result, Advent reminds us of a critical component of faith -- that faith is as much anticipation as it is response. That faith is not just looking forward to fruition and fulfillment, but finds ways to manifest the culmination of God's promises in the present. That faith trusts in God's future while at the same time insists on making God's future present for all people.

On this last Sunday of Advent, we can't let this go. There's too much at stake. There's too much that has been lost. There's too much that has been forgotten about the heart of the Christian faith.

What has been forgotten? Or conveniently left out of Christian living? Much, I suspect, given a cursory glance at what passes for Christianity today. But what Mary and Elizabeth tell us is that the birth of Jesus, the Word made flesh, has never, and never can be, celebrated without our participation in and manifestation of its promises.

And yet our world has decided that Christmas can come and go without turning the world upside down once again. Mary and Elizabeth know the truth, however. That the birth of Jesus, every single year, upends the world as we know it, especially when the world needs it the most and specifically when the world persists in pretending that the status quo can continue, business as usual.

And the world, especially the so-called "Christian" world, has become very good at convincing itself that Mary's Magnificat are simply long-ago words that don't have any bearing on how we live today. But when we dismiss Mary's words, we ourselves dismiss the very meaning of Christmas itself.

Mary and Elizabeth know better. They know what it feels like to be lifted up when you are the lowly. They know what it feels like to be free of shame and finally distanced from disgrace. They know what it feels like to be regarded when you've only been the recipient of the world's practiced disregard. And they see that the promises of Christmas have already come true in their own lives. The promise of Christmas can come true in our lives as well. We can welcome the birth of Jesus into our hearts and lives and not just for one day but for every day. We can look to the stable and see the Messiah and open our souls to magnify the Lord in all that we say and do! Thanks be to God. Amen.