

## LITURGY Sunday December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023

### WITNESS TO THE WORD:

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour..."

The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called "Gaudete" (Gow-day-tay) or "Rejoice" Sunday. In many churches, the penitential purple of the season is put aside in favour of a happier rose (hence our rose candle), and several of the week's lectionary readings encourage hopefulness and joy. "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom," promises Isaiah. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour," sings Mary, the expectant mother of Jesus.

I have always loved this particular Sunday in Advent.

Isaiah's blooming wilderness and Mary's magnificent vision of God's kingdom, expresses the hope that this season promises but also speak of the fearless courage of a radical young woman – so relevant for our contemporary times.

'The Magnificat' – "My song magnifies the Lord" – is the song of joy and revolution that Mary sings in response to her cousin Elizabeth's declaration "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is fruit of your womb!"

I was brought up a Presbyterian but I had two close friends whose families were devout Roman Catholics – one even became a nun for a while. I was mystified by their devotion to "The Blessed Virgin Mary," or "the BVM," as they called her. They were encouraged to strive to be just like her - submissive, obedient, maybe even subservient, too.

Later, when I grew up my brother married into a Catholic family and my lovely sister-in-law, Maree, was amazed when she discovered that I didn't pray to the Blessed Virgin but rather directly to God.

But at theological college I discovered a whole new way of looking at Mary the mother of Jesus – through the lens of feminist theology. I began to read the wonderful old Christmas stories and to notice things that were happening around the edges. Things that were happening to the little ones, the people on the margins. One of the reasons I love feminist theology is the way it reads the text not just from a woman's point of view but from the point of view of those on the margins, the voiceless, those who have been excluded or put down.

Rev Kathryn Matthews Huey, United Church of Christ biblical scholar in her commentary on this passage, reflects that we know that Mary's pregnancy fulfills God's promise of a Messiah, and that Elizabeth will produce the prophet who will prepare the way for that Messiah, Jesus.

But Mary and Elizabeth could also be seen as two ordinary, pregnant women in the most extraordinary time and circumstances, on the brink of greatness but first tending to their relationship with each other and with God.

Motherhood is daunting to every woman, especially the first time around, and these two women have found themselves pregnant under most unusual and unexpected circumstances, one way too old to conceive, and the other we are told, was a virgin. Are we really surprised then that they would get together to offer each other comfort and support?

Don't you wonder what these two ordinary women must have felt about the extraordinary things that were happening to them? That wonderful priest-writer, the Late Henri Nouwen, wrote beautifully about this passage from the Gospel of Luke. He focused not on the big, historic things that were happening but on the meeting of these two women on a dusty road, two women coming together to share the ancient, womanly experience of being with child. Nouwen tried to imagine what was going through their heads. He wrote, "Who could ever understand? Who could ever believe it? Who could ever let it happen? But Mary says, 'Let it happen to me', and she immediately realises that only Elizabeth will be able to affirm her 'yes'. For three months Mary and Elizabeth live together and encourage each other to truly accept the motherhood given to them."

Let it happen to me....truly accept.....

It's one thing for Mary to have accepted her call to be the mother of Jesus, but it's a whole other thing to see her as submissive. I mean, when you really read this song closely, she's talking revolution!

The people in power, the comfortable, are going to be laid low, and the poor and the oppressed will be lifted up and filled with good things. Mary didn't make that up. It was part of her Jewish tradition. She learned it from her ancestress, Hannah, whose song she echoes. This was the ancient story of her people and her faith, those promises of a God who loves and cares for every single one of God's children and totally rejects selfishness, greed, and oppression. The tables are going to be turned!

So this Magnificat, this canticle, this song of Mary, sings of resistance, of an energetic faith like the one that sustained her grandmothers through the ages, an energetic and persistent faith that insisted that God would be true to God's promises.

Justice, healing, compassion – these are important matters to Mary, the good Jewish girl, and so we shouldn't be surprised when they are just as important to the boy she raises. You might say that Jesus is a lot like his mother. Both Mary and Elizabeth are strong, gutsy women who raised their extraordinary sons to be leaders, teachers, and trouble-makers, too, in the eyes of the comfortable, well-fed, powerful who will be brought down by songs like the one Mary sings.

Both Mary and Elizabeth know the story and the hope that have kept their families alive and together for thousands of years, and they know the song of their people, the music of hope that someday the world will be put right, and they know that this moment is the moment of promise that all these things are about to begin, that the promises are beginning to unfold right before their eyes. They continue to unfold, day by day, right before our eyes, too.

Kathryn Matthews tells the story of a most extraordinary interview with three women who wrote a book together called 'The Faith Club'. It started when after 9/11, Ranya Idliby, an American Muslim of Palestinian descent, recruited Suzanne Oliver, a Christian, and Priscilla Warner, a Jew, to write a children's book about their three religions. As the women's meetings began, it became clear that they had their own adult struggles with faith and religion, and they needed a safe haven where they could air their concerns, admit their ignorance, and explore their own faiths.

Ranya, Suzanne, and Priscilla began to meet regularly to discuss their religious backgrounds and beliefs and to ask each other tough questions. Honesty was the first rule of the Faith Club, and with courage, pain, and sometimes tears, they found themselves completely transformed by their experience inside the safe cocoon of the Faith Club. They realised that they had learned things so powerful they wanted to share them with the rest of the world. And so they did – to worldwide acclaim.

Like Mary and Elizabeth, in challenging circumstances, they reached out to each other and found a way - together.

The conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, was one of the most painful issues for the women. This tragedy is now squarely in our faces every night on television as we witness the horrors of Gaza.

Ranya's, Suzanne's, and Priscilla's voices was not really a song. But it was the voices of women speaking up for the suffering of their people and insisting, like Mary, that their voice be heard.

We feel overwhelmed at times by the pain and sorrow of the world. And yet, we have been shown a way and offered a promise: if those of us who are well fed and comfortable, those of us who have power, those of us who have a voice, get out of our comfort zones regularly and listen to the stories and experiences of those who live on the margins, and honour that experience and that pain, as Ranya said, that is the beginning of reconciliation, healing, and peace. And aren't those the things that we really long for, deep down, in this Christmas season?

This true story takes the meaning of friendship to a whole new level. It means that relationship, that community, is the way that we keep our hearts open to one another, where we grow our faith in God and help one another listen for how God is still speaking in our lives; it's the place where we wait **together** for the promises of God to unfold in **our** lives.

It means that relationship, that community is the path we take to righting the wrongs of the world, to repairing the damage that's been done, to dreaming of a better way for all of God's people to live.

Here in this Advent season, then, pregnant with hope, we know that in the days ahead, we are going to watch the promises of God unfold in our lives and in the life we share in community. We are going to help one another search for meaning; we're going to share our stories and walk alongside one another.

And sometimes, we'll just sit in the quiet and wait – together - trusting in the promises of God, listening for a word from that Still Small Voice calling us. And in the midst of our waiting, as Hannah and Mary sang God's praise; and as Elizabeth welcomed her beloved cousin and companion, **we** will rejoice, our hearts dancing within us, believing that God's promises are true. As Christmas approaches, we can feel the hope, we can feel the joy. We are on the brink of great things and our Lord is leading the Way. Amen.