

# Sermon

## “Canticles of Advent - The Song of Mary”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, December 19, 2021

Fourth Sunday of Advent

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,*

*who are one of the little clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
    one who is to rule in Israel,  
whose origin is from of old,  
    from ancient days.*

3 *Therefore he shall give them up until the time  
    when she who is in labor has brought forth;  
then the rest of his kindred shall return  
    to the people of Israel.*

4 *And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,  
    in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.  
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great  
    to the ends of the earth;*

5 *and he shall be the one of peace.*

*Luke 1:39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

46 *And Mary said,*

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,*

47 *and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

48 *for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;*

49 *for the Mighty One has done great things for me,*

*and holy is his name.*

50 *His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.*

51 *He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

52 *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;*

53 *he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.*

54 *He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,*

55 *according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”*

*Luke 1:56 And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.*

**I. This morning the message is the last in a series of  
“Canticles for Advent.”**

**A. A Canticle is a lyric or a song of Thanksgiving that is not from the book of the Psalms and which is included in either the Hebrew scriptures or the New Testament of the Bible. While we do not have the musical melodies which corresponded to the texts, we do have the poems/lyrics of a number of canticles which remain in scripture.**

**B. In recent weeks we have examined in worship:**

- 1. The Song of Simeon**
- 2. The Canticle of Zechariah - *Benedictus***
- 3. Last week we explored the canticle of Zephaniah.**

**C. Today we reach the pinnacle of canticles -  
*Magnificat***

- 1. I know of no other canticle which is used more nor one which has had a more profound**

**impact on the faith.**

- 2. This Song of Mary is sung every night at vespers by millions of Christians and has been sung at that hour for nearly 2000 years.**
  - a. Think of the impact of that - Millions of Christians world-wide singing this canticle daily for thousands of years.**
  - b. No wonder the *Magnificat* is perhaps the most often used text for composers.**

**II. So today we will look at Mary, the mother of Jesus**

**A. There is much that might be said, but I plan to focus on two aspects of Mary and her song.**

- 1. Mary's vulnerability as a model for the vulnerability of *all* who would be faithful.**
- 2. Mary's active engagement in wondering deeply about the actions of God in which our lives are interwoven.**

**III. Vulnerability**

**A. To accept our place as children of God and as disciples of Jesus Christ is to accept our vulnerability.**

- 1. Even though there is enormous resistance to this truth from within the faith itself - it is nevertheless true that:**
  - a. To be a child of God is to accept our finitude and our creatureliness — rather than pretend we are God.**
  - b. To be a disciple of Jesus is to accept that**

**to follow him means taking up our cross and following him - presumably to a similar end. No wonder the great German theologian of the 20th century, Bonhoeffer, wrote in the early years of the rise of German nationalism, “when Christ bids a person, ‘come!’, he bids them ‘come and die.’”**

- B. The resistance - which too often comes from within our faith itself, would have us believe that to be Christian is:**
- 1. A kind of cosmic insurance policy against bad things happening,**
  - 2. A pathway to prosperity and wealth (with God’s blessing)**
  - 3. A movement of world domination where all things and all people are compelled to bend the knee.**
  - 4. But Jesus never indicated *any of these* as the path**
    - a. Indeed, Jesus - himself was very vulnerable. A child of poor peasants, soon turned into a desperate refugee seeking safety in a foreign land, and being raised in a simple family of very modest means.**
- C. So it is not surprising that Mary too is a model for the kind of vulnerability which is so central to the identity of children of God and disciples of Jesus.**

1. A young woman - pregnant out of wedlock
  2. A teen who is encountered by the Holy in a way that must have shifted the ground beneath her feet.
  3. A woman in a patriarchal society
  4. A child of God left to respond to the unreasonable demands of the angel who gives her a new duty.
- D. She embodies *so many* paradoxes which point to the connection between vulnerability and God's power to use us as instruments of redemption:**

**Mary the peasant =====>**  
**Mary the Queen of Heaven**

**Mary the unwed teen-mother =====>**  
**Mary the God-bearer (*Theotokos*)**

**Mary the teenage refugee escaping violence of Palestine  
 by going down to Egypt =====>**  
**Mary who raises Jesus**

**Mary the uneducated (probably illiterate)  
 =====> Mary the one who ponders so many  
 important things in her heart.**

**Mary the first to know the joy of Christ's arrival  
 =====> Mary the one who's heart is pierced by  
 the sword of sorrow at his crucifixion.**

#### **IV. Mary “ponders”**

**A. At every significant turn in the story of Mary and her connection to Christ, she “ponders”**

- 1. verse 1:29 after Gabriel’s announcement**
- 2. verse 2:19 after birth and shepherds tell what was told them**
- 3. verse 2:33 she is amazed**
- 4. verse 2:51 she treasures in her heart**

**B. Mary becomes a model for us**

- 1. Not simply accepting life and God’s work within it as a given - but actively engaged in a process of discovery and marvel as we consider God’s decision to *include us* as agents of some of God’s most important work.**

**C. The distinction between “experience,” and “wisdom” is that the wise person:**

- 1. reflects deeply on the experience**
- 2. “What is the meaning of this moment?”**

#### **V. The *Magnificat* - what does Mary in her vulnerable pondering find?**

**A. Joy — Joy that God has “looked with favor upon the lowliness of his servant.”**

**B. Gratitude — For “the Mighty One has done great things for me”**

**C. The Mercy of God which inverts all of the categories of this darkened world:**

- 1. weak are made strong**
- 2. powerful brought low, lowly lifted up**
- 3. Poor are given good things**

#### **4. Rich are sent empty-away**

### **VII. In just a few days we will gather to recall the events of Christmas**

- A. It might be tempting to reduce Mary to the sentimental image of a new-mother doting over her beloved child.**
  - 1. And there is little doubt that Mary was that**
- B. But Mary-mother of Jesus is *so much more* than that!**
- C. So I encourage you to spend some time in the coming days *pondering Mary*.**
  - 1. Let her vulnerability invite you to wonder about how your own weakness, when coupled to God's loving intention might be the pathway to great power.**
  - 2. Let her status as a young, poor, at-risk person lead you to wonder about your attitude to those in our own community who fit those descriptions.**
  - 3. And let her persistent reflection on the meaning of her life be a model for you as you wonder about how God is at work in and around you.**