

**Sermon on Sunday December 23, 2007 at First Church of Christ  
Longmeadow**

**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent**

**Text: Luke 1, 39-47 Magnificat of Mary**

**Responding with a Pure Heart**

Let us pray: Gracious God, open our hearts and minds to your word. May the meditations of our hearts, minds and bodies be acceptable to you, our Rock and Redeemer.

“Are we there yet?” – Do you remember those words in Pastor Mike’s sermons a few weeks ago when we began our advent journey? Seems like yesterday to me.

Now we can say: “Yes, we are almost there.” Perhaps we are getting anxiously ready for the celebration in two days, perhaps we will be on the road – literally on the highway or on a plane to reach a distant destination – but are we getting ready to be there in our hearts and minds? And what actually does this mean “to be there – where?” To be in the Christmas spirit? Well, I have heard that many times during the last few weeks. Wondering what it meant I was reminded that being in the Christmas spirit - or holiday spirit to be politically correct (in many public places) - means to bring holiday cheer to the people around you. Holiday cheer in form of sparkling lights, colorful cookies, sarcastic jokes, charming reindeer and Santa songs, funny antlers on your head, whistles and bells, and other holiday accessories - all of that is indeed charming and nice – and while observing all this as more of a cultural bystander with a sense of amazement and awe, I wondered, is this all there is to the spirit of Christmas?

Since we are still in Advent time, I’ll take a chance, and invite you to consider a different kind of preparation. We still have time to prepare our hearts and minds in addition to the wardrobe, the food, the gifts and the mood...

Preparing spiritually for an important celebration of our tradition means to open our hearts and minds to the word of God as it is given to us in scripture, to listen how God speaks to us through our relationships with others, to pray and speak to God ourselves, to listen to the small voice within

ourselves , to share with others our experiences of our faith and eventually reflect upon the meaning of it all for our lives. It is an inner journey that we undertake when we prepare for celebration God's presence in our lives more intentionally.

In my own spiritual practice and journey I have found it to be helpful and deeply inspiring to learn with and from the persons described in the bible. Today I'll invite you to engage your mind and heart with Mary's story as the Gospel of Luke describes the first significant steps in her journey with Jesus.

We just listened to her song of praise, her magnificat in which she poetically and powerfully praises God for having chosen her to bear the God-child and how God's actions transform the world. The magnificat is a song that glorifies God and God's action in the world. Mary's song of praise is put into the context of her annunciation and her visit to Elizabeth. Like a lot great poetry and music, the magnificat is the creative response to an awe filled moment in Mary's life. Mary's magnificat is grounded in her experiences with the angel Gabriel and her visit with Elizabeth. She gives birth to the words of the magnificat after letting the words of the angel , his appearance and her encounter with Elizabeth sink into her heart.

When the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will give birth to the messiah, she responds with a wondering question: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"(She responds from her heart, a different kind of response than Zechariah gave earlier when hearing about Elizabeth's unlikely pregnancy, he asks the why question – more from his head) And Mary engages in a dialogue with the angel to get an explanation. Gabriel takes the question serious enough to give her two explanations: first, the older cousin Elizabeth is also pregnant, and secondly, by the power of the holy Spirit "nothing will be impossible with God". The fact that another significant woman that Mary knows is also pregnant seems to be as much convincing as the power of God's spirit.

Mary's response: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word" is an expression of her faith and trust. She is ready to follow through and to abide by God's will for her. However it seems to me that the conversation with the angel was important to Mary. After all, she is a woman who needs to talk things through in order to make an informed decision based on her experiences and trust into her intuition.

Mary travels to Elizabeth to share her experience and to perhaps ask for support, affirmation and advice. Elizabeth just confirms the message of the angel, in my words, yes, you are chosen to bring the lord into this world. Blessed are you and the fruit of your womb!

It is after this affirmation and blessing that the words of the magnificat come out of Mary's mouth. Words so powerful and prophetic that generations of artists, musicians and regular folks have taken comfort, inspiration and encouragement from Mary. It is the magnificat that has lifted Mary up as a role model for a faith that is rooted in an intimate relationship with God. Her relationship with God is based on listening, pondering the word of God, engaging with the messenger and a friend. Responding to God's word to Mary means to put it all together after careful reflection. The Gospel of Luke describes Mary's faith as a deep intuitive trust in God and God's transforming power that will shake up the status quo of one's life and people's lives.

Mary serves as a role model for men and women to discover the mystery of faith again. Mystery of faith means here to get in touch with our imagination, our intuition and our appreciation for the images of faith that are different than our rational thinking. It is trusting the mystical side of the biblical stories as "stories that aren't true on the outside, only on the inside" (in the words of a five year old child quoted in Gertrud Mueller Nelson's book "Here all Dwell Free").

The inside story is Mary's ability to respond with a pure heart to God's call. A pure heart is an image of faith that is connected to the image of the virgin. Mary enters virgin territory. She has never been called by an angel before, neither has she been pregnant before. Whenever we enter a place that is utterly unfamiliar to us, we also enter virgin territory in our soul. Another take on the meaning of being a virgin besides the biological side of things, I have found in the literature of female theologians; to be virgin means to be one, whole in oneself, not perforated by the concerns of the conventional norms and authority, or the powers and principalities. This understanding of Mary makes her a different kind of woman, - a woman of inner strength and active engagement of her faith. By seeing Mary through the words of the magnificat the long held view of her as a submissive meek girl loses its relevance. Instead Mary becomes a patron saint for the "both/and" passion rather than the "either/or" reasoning as Kathleen Norris puts in her book "Amazing Grace".

All our important expressions of faith, life and meaning of relationships take time to ripen in our heart. Responding from a pure heart means that we have created a space in us where a call from God, where an experience with another person, perhaps an unexpected other person, a stranger, can grow and tell us when it is time to give birth, to make the right decision and to follow God's call for your life, or to accept God's aspirations for your children, rather than your own...

Responding with a pure heart is to believe indeed that God will transform you by showing you a way of life that is fulfilling and rich beyond material means. Trusting God from a pure heart may mean to let go of worries and concerns - whether it is the right Christmas celebration or the credit card bills - it may mean to live in the present moment and to open yourself up to a more intuitive way of relating with others, or it may mean to open your heart to the unfamiliar, to the stranger, to the person who is different than you, opening up differently to another person means to ask questions, to check out your assumptions, to be compassionately curious about another persons' perspective, or to receive open heartedly the gifts of friendship.

Like the other day, after the snowstorm, when I came home I found my driveway mysteriously cleared of snow. I hadn't hired anybody to do that. Then I noticed that my two neighbors were working on my front entrance with the shovels. They had plowed my driveway and my entrance way! What an unexpected gift from two thirty something old guys who hardly say good morning. I noticed immediately that as much as I was positively surprised I also began to worry about, what are they going to charge me for this, how can I pay them back with pizza or a six pack of beer, what is the right thing to do??? Perhaps I should hurry up and help them - which I ended up trying to do, and their response was: "Don't worry about it. We are having fun doing it. No charge. And if you'd like to have your old snow-blower fixed up, just leave it out one day next week and I'll fix it at work." I was blown away by their generosity and kindness. A blessing on a cold winter evening; and a learning for me how difficult it can be to simply receive kindness. - How even more do we struggle to simply receive Jesus as a gift of God?

Mary's heart was already open to receive the call from God. Her magnificent response is a poetic rendering of her faith and her experience. She does not have a checklist of activities of how to please God and her neighbors.

First things first. She trusts that her pure heart will find ways to simply follow God's directions, to carry out this pregnancy and raise God's son until he is ready to be on his own and on God's terms to fulfill God's will for his life, while she trusts that she will have the strengths and patience to accompany her child as best as she can and to be able to let him go when the time comes.

Mary symbolizes for many believers in other parts of the world the combination of humble peasant and powerful mother of God. During the 1980ties Christians, in South America and in Poland were sustained by the words of the magnificat and the adoration of Mary while resisting the oppressive power of their governments. In Guatemala during the 1980ties the public recitation of the magnificat was not permitted due to the subversive power of words that talk about God bringing down the powerful from their thrones to lift up the lowly. In learning about the spiritual power of the magnificat for people living under dire political and economic circumstances, I couldn't help but thinking about our brothers and sisters in Haiti – how are they reflecting upon the magnificat? Wouldn't it be fascinating to have a bible study together? To compare notes on our experiences? Perhaps there are powers in our lives that make us feel oppressed too, and Mary's words resonate with some of us on that level.

During this Advent season and beyond Mary has invited us to be vulnerable and honest with God and one another. Tapping into the vulnerable places in our hearts and minds may make us more receptive for the gifts of others, the gifts of authentic love, generosity and truth – trusting that even when our status quo - that is our need for power and control, our need to be perfect in our preparations for Christmas, our need to look good and proper - is turned around just a glimpse – that our response still can be one of praise, gratitude and a joyful contentment.

A joyful contentment that carries us through this time and beyond, that strengthens our faith and trust into the experience that we are loved for who we are by God, a God that moves us beyond our understanding, that speaks to us in many mysterious ways, a God who gives us gifts with no strings attached, no receipts for return necessary, no expiration date. Pure hearted love to be received. Nothing more and nothing less. May your pure hearts be blessed, and may all our souls magnify the Lord now and forever. Amen.

Ideas:

- my story with Mary: never an important part of my life, until I read liberation theology and listened to the voices of women from other parts of the world and my catholic students.
- Mary as a symbol of subversive power
- Mary in art history as the subservient, nice, gentle, passive image of woman and motherhood
- Mary the metaphor for a church
- Mary as an assertive woman and mother advocating for the needs of others,
- Mary losing her son, weeping, in sorrow as a comforter for all mothers who lose children in many different ways
- Mary the symbol of motherhood as a comforter for women whose mothers were not available ( Lynnette as example)
- Mary with a prophetic voice
- Mary and the magnificat as a reminder of the mystery of faith and god's acting in the world
- Mary is responding from an open and mindful heart, she is receptive and trusting, faithful, this is an active response

- Mary is in no way a passive responder to god's call, her voice roars in the magnificent knowing deep down the power of her word and the necessity of calling them out, we still need to hear them to be informed in our actions, in our faith, in our hopes for the world and in our steadfastness to work on justice and peace
- How would our Haitian brothers and sisters read this text and what would they tell us out of their experience, the context in which they live?
- The faithful in Latin America read this text as an empowerment for their struggle and movement to change their world into a more just place including the church.
- The mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, Argentina, an opera is celebrating their power and their dedication to raise their voices and presence to remind the world of their lost sons due to the oppression of the government at the time
- In Guatemala the magnificent was forbidden in the 80ties to be proclaimed publicly, the government feared its subversive power.

Magnificat by Frederick Wooden

My soul magnifies God  
We are enlarged

And my spirit breaks out  
Rejoicing in the face of freedom

That God ( something now within, yet not mine)  
Has glanced at this daughter of hope.

And behold, henceforth, time will know  
And regard me.

For that great mystery is a beam  
Drawn through this lens,

Comforting me and all people

The shadows now dispersed

There is strength here  
Like the sinew of a mother's arm.

It shatters the brittle pride of wealth

It levels the clay foot thrones of tyrants;

It upholds the forgotten,  
The scarred.

Hunger, both body and soul,  
Will be filled.

Riches will no more be rewarded.

The holy one cleaves to those who keep faith,  
It will endure in those who serve mercy

And the promise made to legend ancestors will be kept.