

Receiving Salvation

Good morning friends. (let's pray)

As our Advent reading and prayer reminded us, today marks the fourth and final Sunday in Advent – this season in the ancient Christian calendar that invites us to remember God's promises and to unearth and give voice to our deep ache and longing for God's Kingdom. This season that **prepares** us for what the coming days celebrate – **the birth of Jesus** – the **Incarnation** – the coming of God in flesh to inaugurate God's saving kingdom on earth...

This past Wednesday night, a small collection of us gathered for our **Blue Christmas** service. There were just **25** of us – but a gathering and liturgy that everyone seemed to need. To acknowledge the places of deep ache, grief and loss that can feel so hidden, yet so pronounced in this season of Christmas parties and endless festive cheer.

And as I mentioned at the Blue Christmas service, more than ever I feel the reality and need for Advent – **for us to embrace Advent.**

Last weekend I was at a Christmas gathering, and amidst all the beauty and great food and reunion-like greetings, I found myself, at one point, upstairs, off away from the crowd, talking with **our host** – a friend – about the pain and struggle that they are experiencing as a family – as they walk with their daughter through a battle with an eating disorder.

It was a tender moment – and I so appreciated his honesty, and love for his family amidst a bewildering struggle.

And then he said, *"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for bringing up something so heavy in the midst of this joyful season."*

To which I felt the need to respond, **"No!** *No, this is Advent. Though the culture celebrates the Christmas season all month and invites us to do so, the church has always regarded this as the season of **Advent** – when we remember God's promise and give voice to our **deep ache** for God's Coming. In Advent we are invited to share our ache and cry out together for Jesus to make all things new..."*

This is Advent. Not that we aren't to rejoice in Advent – we are – **Jesus is coming! We'll celebrate this in the coming days!**

But we also **ache and grieve and cry out** – in longing – in deep longing for God's Kingdom and Reign – **on earth as it is in heaven.**

The Lord's Prayer is an Advent Prayer **that we need – all the time** – because **we live in Advent.**

Our world is in Advent.

We **ALL** are – *though some feel it more deeply than others.*

I'm struck with this so often, this fall, on Wednesday mornings – when my schedule or body would allow me to be a part of **PrayerWerks** (our 7am Wednesday morning prayer gathering)...

And particularly, what caught me this fall was Shirley Vargas' repeated request for us to pray with her and Carlos for **the people and nation of Brazil** – as they are in a time of national upheaval, a presidential vote that felt manipulated and the impact on people everywhere.

And I always struggle with prayer requests like that. *How do you pray for a whole country and political system?*

It just seems so complicated – and yet, is just another indication that **our world is in the throes of Advent...** That **Brazil** – and **China** – and **Syria** – and **India** – and **Palestine** and **Israel** – **and right here** – **we all live in Advent** – in a world in need of **God's Saving Action... in need of radical, far-reaching, all-consuming redemption...**

"Far as the curse is found". Right?

That's what the Christmas carol declares.

**"No more let sin and sorrow grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground.
He comes to make His blessings flow
For as the curse is found. Far as the curse is found..."**

Oh, that is our Advent hope, longing and prayer – **is it not?**

Just as it was for Mary – when we meet her in the first chapter of Luke's gospel.

This morning we're going to come again to this familiar story – *on the eve of Christmas Eve* – **but not in the way we often do.**

Because, I suspect, what we need is not as much to be enchanted again by the incredible story of the Annunciation – the story of Gabriel,

God's Angel, coming and announcing to Mary that she will bear a son by the mysterious working of God...

I think that's the part we often focus on – and understandably so, it is the natural fireside story, or even, bedtime story in this passage...

The amazing grace of Emmanuel, God with us!

And the miracle of how it came about...!

But this morning I want us to attend the question: **WHY?**

To what end? Why has God come to be with us?

Because **this**, ultimately, is what Mary's Song **is all about!**

In other words: *this is what Mary **wants to make known!***

And it's easy to miss it. *I think I often have.*

We often come to this story and **feel rather ambiguous**, understandably, about what all Mary would have known or believed about Jesus – this child she would bear. We often assume that she was relatively clueless about what Jesus would ultimately accomplish.

And yet, at the end of this scene, in what we often refer to as "Mary's Song" (**Luke 1:46-56**) we find Mary inviting us into the depths of her **deep Advent awareness, ache and longing – AND declaring to us the end to which Jesus was coming...**

If anything, the language of "Mary's song" reveals to us that here was a young woman who **knew well** both the deep need of the world for God's

redemption **and** the promise of God to one day come and turn the world upside-down – or really, **right-side-up**...

Whether she could quote the passage or not, she obviously *knew well* the promise of God first spoken in **2 Samuel 7** – where God told King David that he, David, would not be the one to build a house for God – but God would provide a place **for him and for Israel**.

2 Samuel 7:10f, "**And I will provide a place** for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore... I will give you rest from all your enemies."

O, how Mary and her contemporaries longed for the fulfillment of **this** promise. **Especially with Herod as their king in those days.**

He was a **tyrant** – cruel to his own people – **his own family** – and all the moreso, the Jews.

But God's promise to David didn't end there.

vs.12f, "**When your days are over** and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son."

That's a promise Mary and all of her contemporaries would have **known well... clung to... prayed for...**

A promise that Isaiah repeats in **Isaiah 9** (a passage many of us know well). **Isaiah 9:6-7**...

"**For to us a child is born, to us** a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. (Do you hear that Brazil? Do you hear that Syria? Do you hear that friends?) The government will be on **his** shoulders. And he

will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever..."

This is the promise and ache that we need **to keep in mind** as we turn to hear the story of **Mary** – *again* – or maybe for the first time...

We meet her **in the struggle of Advent** – in a place of great longing and ache.

Let me read this familiar story to us.

Luke 1:26-56

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus."

Let me stop right there and translate that for us. The name Jesus means **what?**

It means "God's saves" or simply "**salvation**".

Imagine Mary – in an advent world – hearing this announcement, "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him **SALVATION**."

Oh, how Mary's world must have erupted in that moment!

The angel continues...

"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

Again, imagine Mary – **in an Advent world** – hearing this announcement.

Imagine those who suffer in **Brazil** today hearing these words... Or in **Syria**... Or in **India** – in **Sonnagochi** (where we're partnering in our Advent Project to support a ministry that restores women and children ravaged by the sex trade)...

For all the loveliness of this moment in Luke 1, as one bible scholar remarks – "in that loveliness there is **dynamite**." A revolution about to break forth in the world – for the sake of the world... **God on the Throne!**

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

And in response to all this, Mary says simply,

"I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."

Or as another translation has it,

"Let it be to me according to your word."

Then the angel left her.

Vs.39-45

*At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. **In a loud voice she exclaimed:** "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of **my Lord** should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for*

joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Vs.46-56

And Mary said:

*"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God **my Saviour**,
For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.*

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but he has lifted up the
humble.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things but he has sent the rich
away empty.*

*He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to
Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised his ancestors."*

How often do we **dilute and reduce this story** to a **warm, cozy,**
magical moment for Mary – and with that, dilute and reduce **salvation** to
a warm, cozy, magical stirring of the heart or settling of the mind or release
from built-up guilt?

But Mary's story – and particularly, **Mary's Song** – presents and
announces **God's Saving Grace** as nothing less than **a revolution. A**
revolution that will ultimately **turn the world right-side-up.**

Transforming the very fabric of society and the way of our hearts...

- **"scattering the proud in their** inmost thoughts...
- "bringing down rulers from their thrones..
 - "and lifting up the humble."
- "filling the hungry with good things..
 - and sending the rich away empty."

I came across a line on this in a commentary by William Barclay, and it seems so dead-on. He writes,

"It has been said that religion is the opiate of the masses, but... 'The Magnificat [Mary's Song] is the most revolutionary document in the world.'"

Sadly, I think **Christmas** is *the opiate of the masses*. At the least the one that's sung about on the radio by everyone from Mariah Carey to Michael Buble – this ubiquitous generic season of well-wishing and insatiable consumerism...

But **Mary's Song** – God's Saving action in the Incarnation – God becoming flesh – *now that's about a revolution...*

A **moral** revolution – *scattering the proud in their inmost thoughts.*

A **social** revolution – *bringing down rulers from their thrones and lifting up the humble...*

And an **economic** revolution – *filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty.*

Again, to quote William Barclay, "There is loveliness in Mary's Song, but in that loveliness *there is dynamite.*"

Something **EXPLOSIVE** – and that **something** is **Jesus** and the **salvation** He brings.

This is no *warm, cozy, get your hot chocolate, it's-time-for-a-devotional-before-work salvation. This is the power of God to restore all things. Including in you... and in me...*

And as we read the story of the gospel – the story of Jesus' life and ministry – **this is what we see.** We see Jesus overturning the oppressive power structures and social systems of his day – embracing the outcast, forgiving sinners, restoring the broken, lifting up the humble, filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty. Rescuing people from bondage. Setting the oppressed free. Building a community of people who would otherwise have nothing to do with one another – but who now consider one another family. And teaching and empowering a movement of people who would follow Him in laying down their lives not just for their family, but for their **neighbors...** even **their enemies...**

Rather than being the opiate of the masses, **receiving Jesus, embracing Jesus** – means **experiencing a revolution** – being **drawn into a revolution** – being **drawn into** the saving action of God – **life in the reign of Jesus.**

And I know as I say that, the history books – ancient and modern – are riddled with the **failings** of God's people and the **horrors** that Christians have contributed to across the globe.

And yet, there are other stories that get forgotten – beautiful stories – stories like how the early Christians laid down their lives in service of the suffering during the plagues of the 2nd and 3rd century.

"In 165 AD, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, a devastating epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. The mortality was so high in many cities that Marcus Aurelius spoke of caravans of carts and wagons hauling the dead from cities. In all,

during the fifteen-year duration of the epidemic, from a quarter to a third of the empire's population died. Almost a century later, a second terrible epidemic struck the Roman world. In 251 to 266, at the height of what became known as the Plague of Cyprian, 5,000 people a day were said to be dying in Rome. Two-thirds of Alexandria's population most likely perished." (Charles Moore, "Pandemic Love")

And in response, people of all stripes fled the city – doctors, nobles, scientists, government leaders, pagan priests and peoples.

All **except the followers of Jesus...**

"In stark contrast to such hopelessness and fear, the Christians showed how their faith made this life, and even death, meaningful...

Instead of fear and despondency... the earliest Christians expended themselves in works of mercy that simply dumbfounded the pagans. For them, God loved humanity; in order to love God back, one was to love others. God did not demand ritual sacrifices; he wanted his love expressed on earth in deeds of compassion...

In Rome, the Christians buried not just their own, but pagans who had died without funds for a proper burial. They also supplied food for 1,500 poor on a daily basis. In Antioch in Syria, the number of destitute persons being fed by the church had reached 3,000...

During the Plague in Alexandria when nearly everyone else fled, the early Christians risked their lives for one another by simple deeds of washing the sick, offering water and food, and consoling the dying. Their care was so extensive that Julian eventually tried to copy the church's welfare system. It failed, however, because for the Christians it was love, not duty, that motivated them...

In the midst of intermittent persecution and colossal misunderstanding, and in an era when serving others was thought to be demeaning, the "followers of the way," instead of fleeing disease and death, went about ministering to the sick and helping the poor, the widowed, the crippled, the blind, the orphaned and the aged. The people of the Roman Empire were forced to admire their works and dedication. "Look how they love one another," was heard on the streets.

Oh, how our world needs the **salvation** – the moral, social, economic **revolution** that God brings – that is **life in the reign of Jesus...**

God in Christ taking the throne of the Universe and reigning forever – with justice and righteousness.

It's ***a cosmic hope. Far as the curse is found.***

That happens when unassuming people like Mary say **"yes" to Jesus** – receiving Jesus in the most personal way – bowing her life – ***her body, even*** – to the will, plans and purposes of God in Christ.

**Luke 1:38 – "I am the Lord's servant.
Let it be to me according to your word."**

That response is a Spirit-inspired floodgate to the inbreaking of God's kingdom and will *on earth as it is in heaven.*

**"I am the Lord's servant.
Let it be to me according to your word."**

Let's stop for a moment and let's those words sink into us.

**"I am the Lord's servant.
Let it be to me according to your word."**

For all that Mary **could NOT** have known, by the grace of God, ***she knew*** that for the Good and Beautiful Kingdom and Reign of God to come *on earth as it is in heaven* – as huge and grand as that is – **it must first claim her. her body. her reputation. her heart. her mind. her will – her life.**

Though Jesus was not yet even conceived in her, **Mary bowed to Jesus as Lord...** *And the Kingdom of God came near* – in Mary and through Mary.

And in the same way, for the Good and Beautiful Kingdom and Reign of God to come *on earth as it is in heaven* – as huge and grand as that is –

it must first claim us... our bodies. our reputations. our hearts and minds and will... our lives...

As it did for Mary...

I love how cosmic and yet ***up-close and personal*** this story is... how cosmic and ***yet up-close and personal the gospel is...***

Inviting and ***requiring*** you and I to offer ourselves – including our bodies – to the will, plans and purposes of God... Submitting and allowing our lives to be turned ***right-side-up*** by Jesus – as we are drawn into His redemptive revolution on earth as it is in heaven...

Which is not easy. Just as it was not easy for Mary...

For Mary, it meant ***being misunderstood.*** It meant embracing life ***on the margins*** (not the accepted norms of the culture). It meant ***physical sacrifice*** and ***personal suffering.*** It meant ***trading in her plans*** for God's plans. It meant ***embracing as family*** those who were not her kin. It meant ***struggling with God,*** and ultimately seeing ***her son die on the cross.***

Yet, right from the start, Mary knew that Jesus was and is the gospel – the best news for her and for the world... and so she offered up her life with these words, "***I am the Lord's servant. Let it be to me according to your word.***"

So, where is God speaking to us in this?

To you?

To me?

Is there some aspect of **God's Word to you** and to the world... **God's call to you** and to the world – *to which your response has been "No"*?

Is there some aspect of **God's will and call – to you and to the world** – that you've come to believe is something **other than** good news?

Where is the Spirit inviting you today to say with Mary –
"I am the Lord's servant. Let it be to me according to your word."

Where do you need to receive Jesus today – to bow to Jesus today –
on His terms not yours?

And be saved...

Let's pray.