

My soul magnifies the Lord.

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Micah 5:2-5a
Luke 1:39-56

This Advent, we have been on a journey in scripture through space and time. We began by thinking about the signs all around us that reveal God's work in and through us. We then met John the Baptist, whom the gospel writer urges us to listen as the "voice crying out in the wilderness" to prepare the way for the Lord. We remembered that the message came not to the centers of power or to those who held that power but to a prophet in the wilderness. Next we followed a crowd out into that wilderness, curious about this prophetic message and this man claiming to be a servant of God. We heard John's message of harsh words for those who hoard power and resources and who ignore the lowly, those he called a "brood of vipers." To those who were being oppressed then and who are brought low now, however, this world-turning message was both revolutionary and welcome. As we moved through this arc in the gospel of Luke we read from the prophets alongside, each of whom prophesied at a time of great disruption and confusion for the Israelites. All of this, I hope, has worked together to show us that even and especially in times that are confusing, heartbreaking, and difficult, Emmanuel, God-with-us continually advents into our lives and into the world to do new things.

Today we meet Mary, mother-to-be to Jesus, after she has been visited by Gabriel and after she has taken on the responsibility to be mother to the Messiah. We are witnesses to a tender, celebratory scene as Mary greets her cousin Elizabeth, pregnant in her old age with John the Baptist. It is worth pausing to dwell in this interaction for a few minutes at least. It is rare enough in the Bible to find women speaking and even rarer still to find two women talking to one another about their own lives and own bodies. These women and their story have wide-reaching implications; we are reading and thinking about their story thousands of years later, after all. Their story is a step for us as we prepare for cosmos-altering, divine news, and within that truth I want us to consider the context of these two individual women. Mary is the soon-to-be mother of God and she was also an brown-skinned, unwed, teenaged woman. One thing I love about this particular passage is that, despite how vulnerable Mary's existence was, she could still turn to her cousin Elizabeth. Sometimes in Advent and Christmas I think there is so much focus on Mary as an individual that it becomes difficult to imagine Mary having community support around her, like from Elizabeth. It is much more compelling for me as I navigate my own life to remember examples of ancestors in the faith who formed and reached out to community. Yes, Mary had a special divinely-appointed role, but so did Elizabeth. This moment where they come together in acknowledgement of what is going on in their lives - the combination of the divine news of a Messiah with the mundane experience of being pregnant - is a powerful moment.

In the midst of this meeting, Mary breaks into a prophetic song revealing that this new coming of God will turn the world on its head and flip expectations completely. God is both merciful and strong, and has scattered the proud. God lifted the lowly and brought the powerful down from

their thrones. God has fed the hungry and sent away those who already had more than enough. Notice that this part of Mary's song is in past tense. Mary shifts tenses and at various points indicates the future, the present and the past. At first this might seem odd given that Jesus has yet to be born and yet to begin his ministry, but it makes perfect sense when Mary and her role is set within a broader plan and a much longer story. Remember that in our Advent story we have been moving through time, going back and forth between the ancient prophets, the writing of the gospel of Luke a few hundred years after Jesus' ministry, and our current time. The workings of God are not limited to one point in history or to any one grammatical tense. Mary knows this and feels it in her body. This is why we journey through Advent every year over and over again, already knowing where we will end up but also knowing that the journey takes us on slightly different terrain each time.

Our travel through time this week also brings us to our passage from the prophet Micah, writing after the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians - a time filled with heartbreak, confusion, and devastation for the ancient Israelites. Leading up to our passage today, the writer of Micah poetically personifies Jerusalem as she imagines the time of destruction approaching. Even, though, in the midst of this approaching doom, Micah prophecies about a just ruler to come in the future who will be from of old - something new that also somehow comes out of Israelite ancient tradition. This shepherd king will not come from Jerusalem but from Bethlehem, a place of no consequence other than its association as the origin of King David. In the stories of King David coming to the throne, Samuel, the prophet appointed to find and anoint the new king is sent to Bethlehem to find a man named Jesse, from one of the smallest, most insignificant tribes, and one of his sons will be the king. Jesse brings each of his sons forward, starting with the eldest and most capable, but the one to be anointed is David, the youngest of all. Micah reminds the people that King David, foundation of their monarchy and promised one of God, came from worldly insignificance but divine promise. Micah is not denying the difficulties of the time and in their midst reminds the people that there have been times before when God brought holiness out of an unexpected place in an unexpected time.

Mary was an unwed teenager who the rich and powerful would see as inconsequential. They likely wouldn't even see her at all, and yet she is the one proclaiming the work of God through time and space. Her song is called the Magnificat from the Latin for the first line: my soul magnifies the Lord. I invite us today to ask how we are called to magnify the Lord. Some preach the Magnificat as if its meaning is primarily or only spiritual. I don't discount the power that the gospel can bring to our personal spiritual lives AND I believe the message does not end there. The gospel as I understand it speaks to our real-life conditions just as the prophets spoke in response to actual events. Mary's foreshadowing of the gospel, similar to John the Baptist's foreshadowing, is good news for those whom the world makes poor and labels of no consequence. It is also good news for the powers and principalities provided that they repent, turn away from oppression - and there is the difficulty of the gospel in its call to follow God's way, not our own.

We are called to magnify God in our own lives as we seek to become more in line with God's holiness in our own lives and extend that to our communities and the lives of others. The

14th

century German mystic and monk Meister Eckhart wrote this: "We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I also do not give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time. When the Son of God is begotten in us." Eckhart calls us all to follow Mary's example in our own lives. Advent is a season of anticipatory waiting, but it is an active waiting like gestation when there is always something at work even if it is not always visible. As we close this season of Advent, may we take with us the example of Mary and the words of Eckhart, being agents of Christ's rebirth every day in every season.

Amen.