

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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December 23th, 2018

Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, and Christmas day will follow. In the days ahead, some of us will be with our families of origin, which means that Aunt Barb will fall asleep in a chair, your cousin will try to get you into a pyramid scheme, and grandpa will probably say something racist. For others, you might expect Christmas movies and delivered meals as you celebrate. Based on your knowledge and experience, you can roughly predict the days ahead.

And, if you've ever been to church on the Sunday before Christmas, you could predict that we'd talk about Jesus's mother, Mary. Today's gospel is the familiar Magnificat. We've sung it at our Evening Prayer services. We've read it on Mary's feast day each summer. And there are countless spinoffs in our hymnal. But with this familiarity, our predictions about God's actions can become sterile.

Yet, some have taken the Gospel message and turned it into cultural idolatry. You've probably heard the televangelists with their promises that if you utilize positive speech and donate to their "cause" you will receive financial blessings and physical well-being from God. These "religious leaders" love a selfie in their plane or mansion to show their "faith." These con-artists cherry-pick the Scriptures to support beliefs

built on Biblical falsehoods that are used to exploit the poor. And, often, we remain idle because, at one extreme, we don't know what the Scriptures say and, at the other extreme, in our familiarity, we've become too comfortable. Either way, we've lost the ability to predict God's actions and, thus, miss God's presence in our lives.

But, today's reading can help us explore our misunderstanding. In the gospel, we heard about two women of different ages. Elizabeth was an old woman who could have been divorced for not bearing a child. You see, in ancient Judaism, they did not believe in an eternal place after you die, like heaven. Instead, you would live on, eternally, through your descendants. Salvation and eternal life came from your children. So, for decades, Elizabeth had failed to bring salvation to her husband, and yes, that burden was on Elizabeth. She would have been labeled as useless, irrelevant, and a social outcast. // And, the other girl we met in today's reading was young – oh, so young. She was likely around twelve-years-old. She'd looked a lot like the young, unwed teen who walked the halls of my high school. While Mary could easily be stoned for her pregnancy, the Midwest nice at my school would rather stone the teen with words, gossip, and “Biblical” falsities. You see, in the end, Mary was another cultural mess-up, operating outside of what was labeled “good, right, and normal,” she was a failure of the system just like Elizabeth. And, are *these* women really the ones that we want to call favored? Did *these* women really feel blessed? I mean, did God actually

choose *these* non-conforming women for divine work? Let's be honest, who in their right mind could have predicted that?

Well, at first Mary and Elizabeth couldn't have predicted it. That's one of the difficult things about predicting what God will do, it's pretty unpredictable. But, these women remembered something about how God works.

You see, whether we realize it or not, our culture likes to exalt power, status, wealth, and success. We buy into the capitalistic system that keeps us running the sprint to work, spend, and repeat. We believe in a model of scarcity that convinces us that there isn't enough, so we better grab as much as we can get. We believe that we have to say, do, and act the right way to earn God's favor. And as a country, we believe that if we don't silence, oppress, and kill the other, then we will be the ones who are oppressed, silenced, and killed.

But this irrelevant old woman and pregnant unwed teen knew better. They knew their history. So, when Mary saw Elizabeth, Mary burst into song. But, her song wasn't new. Instead, Mary sang what we might call a mashup of the famous songs from Hannah and the Psalmist, originally sung in 1 Samuel (chapter 2) and Psalm 113. You see, Mary's song was not a one-off, rather her song was God's song. It's a song that acknowledged that for thousands of years that God has acted in predictable ways – that God works in a predictably unpredictable manner that subverts social constructs and our human tendencies. For, God favors a barren woman and an un-wed teen, God

favors the felon stripped of voting rights, God favors the queer person without a restroom, God favors the elderly who struggle to participate, God favors the religious minority afraid to worship, God favors the weak, the tired, the downtrodden, and the hungry. But that's not everything, for God made us promises – a promise that God will always care for us and that God will never, ever leave us no matter what happens.

And, Mary recognized these truths in her life because she had heard how others witnessed God's actions. In the weeks ahead, we too will hear the faith stories of our ancestors found in Luke's gospel. The thing about Luke's gospel is that we will need to dismiss our assumptions so that we can truly discover how God works. We'll need to let go of all that we confessed during Nolan's baptism – namely, the systems of oppression that saturate our world and conceal God's purposes. Once we do that, we will begin to see that Jesus's ministry is rooted in Mary's Song, a song that comes from that holy mashup from Hannah and the Psalmist, and a song that comes from generations of God's action. Together we'll discover that, for Luke, salvation comes when governments are overhauled and transformed. New life is discovered when non-violence and peacemaking reign. God's presence is realized in radical generosity and servant leadership. And, when the value systems of this world are finally toppled with love, then God's vision is fulfilled.

Friends, there it is. In the weeks ahead, we will gather to explore God's actions in Jesus's ministry. We'll realize that our God transforms words into actions. And, even if *how* God works is unpredictable, we at least have a blueprint for God's vision in Mary's song. For this teen mother will nurture her son with God's vision. She'll teach him, she'll form him, and then, she'll send him. And, Jesus will reveal God's vision for humanity. As we explore this story together, we'll gather at this table each week, as Jesus did with his friends. We'll be fed and nourished, and then we'll be sent into the world to sing our song, Mary's song, God's song. Amen.