

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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It's so good to be back with all of you today as we celebrate the Feast of Mary, Mother of Our Lord. And we all know that feast days are fun, right? Because they give Pastor Jason an excuse to break out the incense!

But I think that sometimes the Gospel stories we hear for feast days can feel a little out of step with the rest of what we've been hearing week after week in our lectionary readings.

You see, we're currently in Ordinary Time, that long stretch of the church season that runs from Pentecost to Advent, where each Sunday our Gospel readings follow Jesus throughout Galilee as he teaches the disciples and preaches to crowds and heals the sick. We often talk about how Ordinary Time falls between the high highs of Christmas and the low lows of Lent, how it's meant to be a time of reflection on how our faith shows up in the ordinary, everyday parts of our lives. I especially love how Pastor Anna Madsen calls this season "habit-making time," that gives us "the opportunity to settle into, to embody, to live out... that which we say we believe." Put simply, it's an opportunity for us to continue showing up, to continue learning about who Jesus was, and to continue being sent out into the world to practice using his ministry as a guide for our everyday lives.

But today, suddenly, we're interrupted! In our Gospel story, we're transported all the way back to Advent, to before Jesus is even born! And yet, as we read

Mary's **incredible song of praise** today, I think it actually has a lot to teach us in this current, habit-making time.

You see in our Gospel today, Mary demonstrates one of the most important habits of faith that we are called to develop: the habit of remembering.

To understand what I mean, it's helpful to remember what comes immediately before Mary declares the incredible song of praise we hear today. The angel Gabriel has just appeared to her and told her that she will give birth to the son of God. As a poor unmarried woman living in the Roman Empire, this news means she is risking divorce, shame, and ostracization from her family and her community. She is now facing a reality that is rife with not just uncertainty, but very real danger.

And yet even amid this reality, Mary makes an absolutely audacious claim. In her song she says "Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed." She doesn't say "Oh, I hope things will work out," or "Maybe in the future I'll be blessed by this." She declares with complete and utter certainty "Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed." To say that—to say "surely" in the face of exclusion, of divorce, of destitution? That takes an audacious amount of faith. And it's only through this faith that Mary is able to imagine a version of the future that is not at all in line with her current reality.

My first reaction upon reading that line is always "how?" How can Mary be so sure of this future that seems so very far away?

But as we read the rest of her song, the answer becomes clear. Mary can be sure of the future because, as she says “the Mighty One has done great things for me.” Mary can be sure of the future because she remembers what God has done not only for her, but for her ancestors. Almost every line of her song echoes the Scriptures: Mary remembers Hannah’s song and the Psalms. She remembers God liberating the Israelites and keeping God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah. She remembers a God who humbles the powerful and feeds the hungry, a God who repeatedly lifts up those the world has overlooked.

This is one of the gifts of Scripture—it gives us a memory bigger than our own, reminding us that our lives are part of a much larger story. We aren’t the first people to feel afraid, or to face uncertainty, or to look out at the world and wonder where God is. Scripture gives us the memory of generations who have experienced that same fear. And it gives us the memory of generations who have discovered over and over again that God will faithfully see them through.

It is through this act of remembering that Mary is able to boldly proclaim a vision that seems impossible. She can look at her own dangerous future and say “If this is who God has been, then **surely** I can trust what God will do next.”

This is why I think Mary’s song is actually perfect for us to hear during this Ordinary, habit-making time. Because our ability to imagine a better future is a crucial part of what it means to have faith. It’s a crucial part of being able to build up a better world. And to have this ability to imagine, to build up a

better world, we need to cultivate the habit of remembering God's faithfulness when things are ordinary.

And so, in this place we gather and we read Scripture full of stories of faith and fear and pain and joy and humanity that have come before us. We sing hymns that our ancestors have sung and proclaim the creeds that were written by Christians thousands of years ago. We gather around this table in community with all those around the world and throughout time and space. And sometimes we might wonder why we keep doing the same things and reading the same stories and praying the same prayers over and over again. But each and every time we read or sing or pray together we are practicing how to remember. And moreover, we're practicing how to remember together, which is important. When Mary receives the amazing and terrifying news that she's going to give birth to the son of God, she travels hundreds of miles to be with Elizabeth. And there's a big difference in the way she responds to the news before and after she meets with Elizabeth. Initially, when the angel Gabriel tells her the news, Mary responds with obedience. But it's only after she sees Elizabeth, only after Elizabeth blesses her that Mary bursts forth with this exuberant song of praise we hear in our Gospel today. Mary's ability to remember God's faithfulness, Mary's ability to imagine a new future is strengthened through relationship. That's what church is, what remembering together does. And I think that's especially important for us to hear right now.

Last week, Pastor Jason talked about how with Dr. Jordan's departure, we find ourselves as a church between two shores. And he talked about how many of us have shores in our own lives that we're caught between too.

Perhaps you're nervously getting ready to start the new school year. Perhaps you're mourning the end of a relationship. And perhaps you're overwhelmed navigating an increasingly uncertain and scary and fractured world. In those moments it's so easy to focus on what we do not know, for the fear to make it difficult for us to imagine a future where God's peace and justice reign.

But Mary's song today invites us into something different in this ordinary time, habit-making time. It invites us to make a habit of remembering. To practice looking back at the scriptures and remembering that we have a God who overturns all our worldly expectations, a God who has uplifted the lowly and filled the hungry with good things time and time again. To practice looking back at the history of this church and remembering how this community has always found new life amidst loss and a way forward amidst uncertainty. To practice looking back at our own lives and remembering all the times that we thought we wouldn't make it and somehow did. Because the God who has gotten us this far is not finished with us yet.

So come. Come to this table and remember. Join in the prayers and remember. Look around at this community and remember. And as we practice this remembering, know that we, like Mary, will be able to look toward a future we cannot fully see and say **"Surely."** Amen.