

Magnificat
Luke 1:26-55; Micah 5:2-5
Advent 4

Micah 5:2-5

²But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. ³Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; ⁵and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 1:26-55

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her,

"Do not be afraid, Mary,
for you have found favor with God.

³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you will name him Jesus.

³²He will be great,
and will be called the Son of the Most High,
and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

³⁵The angel said to her,

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;
therefore the child to be born will be holy;
he will be called Son of God.

³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age
has also conceived a son;
and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.”

³⁸Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me
according to your word.”

Then the angel departed from her.

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill
country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And
Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry,

“Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

⁴³And why has this happened to me,
that the mother of my Lord comes to me?

⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting,
the child in my womb leaped for joy.

⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment
of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

⁴⁶And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”



The Sermon

It had just gone completely dark outside—it was around 6:00—and there was a disorienting silence of the footsteps, as students walked on the fresh snow of the sidewalks. It was a late afternoon in December, 1989, and I was walking in Cambridge, England. I walked the street in front of King’s College—the majestic, centuries-old, honey-colored buildings where, among other gifts to the world, so much immortal choral music has been produced over the years.

I had taken the 45-minute bus ride from Bedford, the town in England where I was living with a couple who became my virtual English parents. I had disembarked at a bus stop way too early, so I had walked an extra hour or so into the heart of the Cambridge University area, while darkness gradually fell and snow had started to fall.

I was coming to visit a friend, a young friar I had met at a church retreat a few weeks earlier. By the lights of the shop windows, I checked the directions I had been given for St. Bene’t’s Abbey. That visual memory, and the breathtaking silence, combined with the anticipation of seeing my friend again, makes for a stirring Christmastime memory. I’ll bet you have some of those, from childhood, or youth, or young adulthood; or last year, or last week.

I also remember, some time before England, a late Christmas Eve—I think I had worked a late restaurant shift, and I’m sure there was nobody around to talk to that night—when nothing in the world felt good or right or hopeful. I remember making what seemed like a defiant decision to put on a Christmas record and cut up some green and red paper that was handy, as if to say, “I may be the only one here, but I’m going to have my Christmas Eve.”

I'll bet you have a couple of those, too: when Christmastime only seemed to highlight the general emptiness, or the unresolvable anger, or circumstances of deep concern, or any of a hundred other possible painful situations.

If, this Advent and Christmas week, you could go back to the person you used to be, and give a message to your younger self—whether it was last year or five years ago or 50 years ago—what would you say to the person that was you then?

Frederick Buechner muses, as only he can:

“The lovely old carols played and replayed till their effect is like a dentist’s drill or a jack hammer,
the bathetic banalities of the pulpit
and the chilling commercialism of almost everything else,
people spending money they can’t afford
on presents you neither need nor want,
“Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” the plastic tree,
the cornball crèche, the Hallmark Virgin.

“Yet for all our efforts,” Buechner writes, “we’ve never quite managed to ruin it. That in itself is part of the miracle...”ⁱ

I know a minister who had a small church up North, and one year, I think Christmas Day was on a Sunday (as it will be next year), and for whatever reason, the regular musician was unavailable that day, and a substitute church musician could not be found. The only available musician they could find was a two-person lounge act, who agreed to come and stand in for the organist and choir.

I don’t know how to describe the keyboard sound other than to say it sounded exactly like you would expect a late-1970s lounge act to sound. The singer had on something like a crushed-velvet leisure suit that, even at the time, was about 20 years outdated, and his hair was very large. And he’d sing a line and then hold the microphone out to his side...

And you know what? It was still Christmas. You can’t kill it.

People do a lot of singing at this time of year. Sometimes we do it because we're celebrating, and it's fun, and it brings us together, and the songs are so great.

But God knows that sometimes, it's hard to sing.

Whether it's Christmas fatigue, or painful circumstances—just an existential ache that hovers like a thick fog—or for whatever reason you're just not into it—it's hard to sing when your heart's not in it.

The melody doesn't come easily, and even if you can manage to get it out, it probably doesn't ring very true.

An angel called Gabriel was sent by God to a young woman named Mary.

He came to her, and greeted her, and gave the reassurance that God was with her.

And then he launched into what Bible scholars call a hymn:

“Do not be afraid, Mary,
for you have found favor with God.
And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you will name him Jesus.
He will be great,
and will be called the Son of the Most High,
and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.
He will reign over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

After that encounter—which does not seem to have overwhelmed Mary in the least—she went to a Judean town in the hill country, and visited her cousin Elizabeth, whom the angel had told Mary was, even “in her old age,” six months pregnant.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, she felt the child in her womb—the future John the Baptist—leap.

And Elizabeth delivered this hymn:

“Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.
And why has this happened to me,
that the mother of my Lord comes to me?
For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting,
the child in my womb leaped for joy.
And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment
of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

And Mary said—or sang, practically—the hymn that posterity has called the Magnificat, after the first word in Latin, *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.”

Magnificat anima mea Dominum: My soul magnifies the Lord.

The animation within me—
not just a force that gives me life, but my very “living-ness”—
which was created and brought into being by God,
and now is entrusted to me—

My soul magnifies—“makes great”—the Lord.

Human custom, tradition and rules may have decided that this place was to be referred to as Zechariah’s house,
but it is the carriers of life who speak the truth and beauty of God.

Even the way they speak to each other is more like an angel’s:
They don’t just speak dialogue to each other; they sing.

There is some suggestion, made by the luminary Biblical scholar Raymond E. Brown, that the hymns that appear in Luke’s gospel, including the Song of Mary, the Magnificat, originated with an early Christian community for whom poverty was a way of life. They were powerless and poor, and related directly to the fact that “Jesus came blessing the poor, the hungry, the

downtrodden, and the persecuted... Yet Jesus entrusted himself to God's hands..."ⁱⁱ This early community would have sung hymns that celebrated what God had done in Jesus:

“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Mary and Elizabeth, women in a world where women had practically no monetary rights or independent security, as well as being members of a nation whose history and present circumstances were a redundant narrative of defeat, persecution, and hopelessness, would have known what that means.

In a word, it would be hard to expect them to be feeling particularly “Christmasy.”

Despite or even because of the pain, and the sadness, the frustrations, the injustices perpetrated on them and their people, and maybe even a wish that everything would just magically “get better,” they offer every succeeding generation, including ours, courage to let God into their lives.

The witness of the hymns they sing to each other is the opposite of jadedness, or cynicism; it is a trusting openness, a defiant insistence, even in their desolate circumstances, on still believing in joy, wonder, and awe.

Elizabeth and Mary stand above every brilliant and detailed theologian; their theology leaps off the page; they are way beyond logic, philosophy or argument; they are singing.

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Do you remember particular Christmases in your childhood, or your young adolescence? Do you remember any particular Christmastimes in your salad days, when you were just getting started as a young adult?

If, this Christmas season, you could go back and speak to the person you used to be in that Christmastime, what would you say?

And some day—maybe next year, maybe in ten or twenty years—when you are looking back at the person you are today, right now...

If that future “you” could tell you something that you need to hear, or that you really wish someone could definitively tell you...

What do you think your future self will want to say to the person you are right now?

“A Blessing of Angels” by John O'Donohue:

May the Angels in their beauty bless you.
May they turn towards you streams of blessing.

May the Angel of Awakening stir your heart
To come alive to the eternal within you,
To all the invitations that quietly surround you.

May the Angel of Healing turn your wounds
Into sources of refreshment.

May the Angel of Imagination enable you
To stand on the true thresholds,
At ease with your ambivalence
And drawn in new directions
Through the glow of your contradictions.

May the Angel of Compassion open your eyes
To the unseen suffering around you.

May the Angel of Wildness disturb the place
Where your life is domesticated and safe,
Take you to the territories of true otherness

Where all that is awkward in you
Can fall into its own rhythm...

May the Angel of Justice disturb you
To take the side of the poor and the wronged.

May the Angel of Encouragement confirm you
In worth and self-respect,
That you may live with the dignity
That presides in your soul...

May all the Angels be your sheltering
And joyful guardians.ⁱⁱⁱ

Christmastime may not always find you feeling much like singing. But Elizabeth and Mary are inviting you to join them in being open to joy, wonder and awe anyway.

Will you bow with me as I share a prayer by the preeminent Reformed theologian of the 20th century, Karl Barth.

Lord, may you now let us this year once more approach
the light, celebration, and joy of Christmas Day
that brings us face to face with the greatest thing there is:
your love, with which you so loved the world
that you gave your only Son,
so that all of us may believe in him
and therefore not be lost, but may have eternal life.

What could we possibly bring and give to you?
So much darkness in our human relationships and in our own hearts!
So many confused thoughts, so much coldness and defiance,
so much carelessness and hatred!
So much over which you cannot rejoice,
that separates us from one another and certainly cannot help us!
So much that runs directly against the message of Christmas!

What should you possibly do with such gifts?
And what are you to do with such people as we all are?
But all of this is precisely what you want to receive from us
and take from us at Christmas—
the whole pile of rubbish and ourselves, just as we are—
in order to give us in return Jesus, our Savior,

and in him a new heaven and a new earth,
new hearts and a new desire,
new clarity and a new hope for us and for all people....

Be among us as we once again...together
prepare to receive him as your gift!
Make it so that we may rightly speak, hear, and pray,
in proper, thankful amazement
about everything that you have in mind for all of us,
that you have already decided regarding all of us,
and that you have already done for all of us! Amen.”^{iv}

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ⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*. Harper San Francisco, 1991.

ⁱⁱ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke*. New York: Doubleday, 1993, pp. 352-353.

ⁱⁱⁱ John O’Donohue, “A Blessing of Angels,” in O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.

^{iv} Karl Barth, “Advent: Your Gift to Receive,” in *Fifty Prayers*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.