

Come Now and Set Us Free
Freedom From Striving
Luke 1:46-55

Call to Worship

The traditional text for this third Sunday of Advent is from Isaiah, who spoke for God in days when it felt like the world was falling apart. He said,

*Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God,
who will come and save you.”*

—Isaiah 35.3-4

And for these days, a more recently spoken poem of blessing:

You who sit by the bedside,
who stay late to finish the report,
who wrestle your tireless demons,
do not fear.

You who gaze at the x-ray,
who face another meeting at the school,
who care for the aging parent,
have courage.

You who lament our cruelty and greed,
who write letters about the climate,
who stand in silence outside the prison,
stay firm.

God is not far, nor careless, nor scornful.
God is here, here to accompany,
here to love, here to save.

Keep faith.

When you are weary God will strengthen you;
when you are afraid God will sustain you;
when you cannot go on, rest your head:

God will carry on.

In your weak hands, in your feeble knees
the Beloved is present, full of grace:
not the outcome but the presence, always.

Take courage.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes

Sermon

I am one of those gift givers who thinks Christmas shopping takes up however much time you give it. I know some people begin in September. You've already been picking up gifts for

months. I so admire that. But this year again apparently, I am not thinking about what to get for the people I love until sometime after December 15th. I can give you elaborate theological explanations for why Christmas gifts actually *should* be received during the twelve days after December 25. There are valid legal reasons to support the argument that Valentine's Day is the statute of limitations for sending out Christmas cards. But the truth is, I just don't get to doing those things until they're already late. And then all my resolutions about supporting retailers who are not Amazon go completely out the window and I give in to the allure of one-day shipping again.

Some years I find something that I think will be a fabulous gift for everyone I know. A couple of years ago it was a fake TV—a little box you plug in and all night long it flashes colored lights, so that anyone looking at your window will think you're awake and watching television instead of sleeping, or on vacation. I was totally convinced that this was the \$17 replacement for a home security system. Everyone in my family now has one of those things, still in the box on a garage shelf, I'm pretty sure—unless it's already been sold at the rummage sale.

Another year I found a little thing that looked just like a credit card, but it's a combination flashlight and magnifying glass. You keep it in your wallet, and when the waiter brings you the check in a dimly-lighted restaurant, you take this thing, aim it, and you can actually see the numbers on the check, instead of holding your arm out and knocking over a wine glass while you're trying to read the small print. The light illuminates the numbers, and the magnifying glass makes them bigger. For a few days I thought this was the best invention ever. I'm pretty sure my gifts that year too prompted a lot of polite thank-you's.

I was thinking about that gadget this week because this morning's text is the *Magnificat*, the song of Mary. *Magnificat* comes from the Latin word for "magnify". The story is that an angel comes to Mary and tells her she's been chosen to carry the gift of God to the whole world. The text we read this morning is her song of response. Her first words are "My soul magnifies the Lord." *Magnify*. What a funny word to use there. I looked it up to see if the Greek word used in the original writing meant something different than the way we hear it. But it doesn't. To *magnify* something is to make it look bigger than it appeared. How can you magnify something that is already as big as God? What does it mean, for Mary's soul to magnify God?

Mary is pregnant, of course, so in a very literal sense, she *is* growing, magnifying the seed of God's presence inside her body. And in that literal way, Mary's story is unique. She is Mary, the Mother of God, a saint. But this story of a poor, unmarried pregnant girl who is in the biggest mess of her life and is also about to carry God into the world is also a metaphor, a story we are all invited to find ourselves in.

At the moment she sings this *Magnificat*, Mary has heard something that is not obviously good news. Something is happening that is bigger than her choice. Someone has announced that from this moment on, everything in her life will be different, and pretty soon her body will confirm that. Maybe you know a moment like this from the history of your own life. Someone has been found...or lost. A loved one is gone. A diagnosis is spoken out loud. A job you counted on suddenly ends.

Announcements bring good and bad news. Angels are not immediately identifiable. I have no doubt that Mary felt as out of control of her life as you have felt in some moments of yours. She had no idea what was in front of her, or what would come next, or what the end of the story would look like.

What do we magnify when we face moments like that one? Our tendency, I think, is to magnify first the disaster in front of us—we make it bigger than it already is, as we layer it with our fears. Then, as we collect ourselves a little, we gather our resources so that we can begin to magnify ourselves. We try to make *ourselves* bigger than whatever has happened to us. We get out that little flashlight and aim it at our strength and resolve. Our knowing what we want and how to get it. Our determination to beat whatever stands between us and mastery of our own destiny.

And in so much of what we do on this earth, in this life, that's how we make something good happen. But in Mary's story, the worst news a young girl could possibly receive was the same news that launched her on a path toward something bigger and more important than she'd ever imagined for her life. In *this* story the response that mattered, the words that needed to be said, were not "I can beat this thing." They were, "Here I am, God. I trust you. I am willing to be whatever *you* say I am, to live a life that *you* are in charge of, not me."

Maybe there are moments like that for us too. Moments that ask of us something other than power, something upside-down from that rugged self-sufficiency we are so well schooled in. Moments that depend, absolutely, on our ability to let go of our *in-chargeness*, so that God can do something with us that we haven't thought about or figured out first.

When the angel came to Mary with God's strange request for a home inside her body, the answer had to be, simply, "yes". Whatever this is, wherever this will take me—yes. No counting the cost first, no figuring out the potential difficulties, the availability of exit strategies along the way. Just "yes". Yes to what came to her; "yes" to the reality of her life, trusting that the angel who began by saying, "Do not be afraid; you have found favor with God" knew what she was talking about.

Imagine it again: a fourteen or fifteen-year old girl who is not married, hearing for the first time that she's pregnant. It's almost unthinkable painful. But that awful announcement to her began with the words: "Do not be afraid; you have found favor with God."

For just a moment, go back in your imagination to the most heartbreaking or humiliating news you have ever received; a moment when you felt too small, not enough, to deal with whatever was looming in front of you. Imagine—no, *know*—that that news came with the words, "Do not be afraid; for you have found favor with God." *You have found favor with God.*

It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? It sounds like a preacher who doesn't have any idea what real life is like. Like a pat on the head from someone who always says, "It will be all right" when things are not all right at all. But I've had those moments too. And I will tell you that when I look back on them, I can see in them the God that Mary sings about, the God who takes disasters and makes something good from them, the God whose *business* is turning things upside down.

In her *Magnificat*, Mary sings about a God who knocks the proud off their high horses so he can pull victims out of the mud. A God who sends the rich and powerful away from the table so that the hungry can eat until they are full. In a world that has always said, blessed are the beautiful, blessed are the successful, blessed are the healthy, this is a God who says “Blessed are the poor and the hungry and the meek.” The whole plan God is putting in place by coming among us, Mary says in her song, is about turning things upside down, reversing our expectations, the way we know things *always* turn out. Scrambling what seems obvious to us about which pieces of news contain God’s favor and which definitely do not.

The silent words buried inside the worst news of our lives are, always, “*Do not be afraid. You have found favor with God.*” An exquisitely beautiful love can rise to the surface and be magnified in the face of illness and death. The grace of forgiveness is hidden underneath the mistakes and failures that get humiliatingly exposed. Inside all those holes in our lives that we keep dancing around, trying desperately not to fall in, is the God who lights up the darkness.

I know this. I know it because the God who is waiting for us is the same God who found an unmarried pregnant teenage girl named Mary and chose her to bring holiness into the world. She didn't have to be perfect, or ready, or strong. She just had to say “yes”. For that one moment in history, I wonder if even God waited in a sort of breathless suspense, to hear what she would say. This whole divine story we’re here celebrating two thousand years later hung on Mary’s answer to the angel, the word of a frightened young woman who didn’t understand any more about the workings of God than we do.

Meister Eckhard, the 14th century Christian mystic, said “We are all meant to be mothers of God.” Maybe God’s next act of blessing the world depends on your “yes”. Your willingness to magnify—to make bigger—the God who comes, every time, to turn shame into gratitude, poverty into richness, power into peace, sorrow into joy. Your sorrow. Your joy.

So sing to us again, Mary. Sing to us of your God until your song becomes ours, until the God you magnify becomes visible, even to us.