
Gøød Better News
Chapel in the Park United Church
December 24, 2023
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 1:26-35, 46-55

“My soul doth magnify the lord”. What wonderful words that we just read from Luke. The words are well known to many of us. The words come to us in Advent just as surely as Advent comes at all. The words are words of hope. The words are words of faith.

These well-known and well-loved words are sometimes called “the Song of Mary”. They are also called the “Magnificat” because in the Latin wording of the text, the first word is “magnificat” - meaning “magnify”. And the fact that the text is named at all tells us that these words have been part of church life and church liturgy for a long time. The words are much loved and cherished.

But - at the same time - this focus on Mary is not quite so simple. In Protestant tradition, Mary is not given much space in our minds and our hearts. Of course, Mary is a dominant character in Christmas Pageants. But I was raised to believe that thinking of Mary as someone really special was a job that we left to the Catholic Church. Mary was a part of our pageants, but she was not a part of Protestant theology. In fact, I remember growing up being suspicious of Catholics mainly because of their reverence for Mary. And even today, Catholics are still accused of worshipping Mary. Which is an incorrect and misleading interpretation of Catholic theology and liturgy.

For Protestants, Mary has often been seen as simply a vessel. A container. A container that carried something important - Jesus. But Protestants consistently emphasized that Jesus was the important part - not the container itself. On the one hand, I understand that position. Clearly, Jesus is important to us. On the other hand - many of us are parents, and we know the many ways that we contribute to the lives of our own children. A mother is not just a vessel. Parents contribute far beyond providing food and shelter to a child. If we limit our understanding of Mary to simply “a vessel”, then perhaps we miss deeper possibilities.

In any case, the lectionary gives us two readings about Mary this week, so it's a good chance to reflect on what Mary means to us - and on what Mary might mean to us.

In our first reading, Mary was approached by the angel Gabriel who told her some news. But let's be honest - the news was not only a surprise to Mary, it was probably not even possible that she understood the news. She certainly could not have understood the implications of the news. Gabriel did not give Mary an advance copy of the New Testament after all. Even in the text it says that Mary "was much perplexed by the angel's words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."

Mary pondered. Well of course. How could she not ponder news that was so radical, so unexpected, so hard to understand, so hard to believe. You may recall that Mary ponders at other times too - she ponders after the shepherds visit and make their own statements about Jesus. Understandably, Mary had a lot to ponder.

In our second reading, however, Mary does not ponder. 10 verses after she "was perplexed by the angel's words", Mary sings a song that is complex and deeply theological. She sings a song of clarity, of certainly. A song of being at peace with what was happening to her.

When we read these stories together as we just did I feel like someone flipped over too many pages at once. There must be a piece missing. A part in the story where Mary spent time reflecting on the news and reacting to it. Perhaps a part of the story where Mary was angry, or confused, or ... something. But instead, an angel comes to Mary with news that the spirit will put a seed inside her and she will give birth to the son of God and she basically says, "... and?". In the story, she takes it all in stride. Mary, the unmarried, pregnant teenager somehow instantly becomes the perfect Mary.

And what are we to do with this image that we have of this perfect Mary. The one who understood the incomprehensible. The one who could be calm in the face of total chaos and uncertainty. The one who in a time of deep stress wrote the Magnificat. Instead of reaching for a bottle of Prozac like you and I probably would have done.

I'm sorry to tell you this - but I cannot relate to that perfect Mary. In fact for many of us, that image of a "perfect" Mary is a barrier. It's a barrier to getting down to who the real Mary might have been. The angel came to Mary and took away her innocence. Then

the church came to Mary, and wrote her story in a way that denies Mary her basic humanity, her frailties, her insecurities, her fears. Instead of being given a story about a scared unmarried teenager dealing with pregnancy - someone we might actually relate to - we have been given a story of the perfect Mary who understood everything and felt truly blessed to be chosen by God for a particular task. I feel like the real, human Mary is in the story, but that she has been buried in it somewhere beyond our view.

But of course we can choose how to read this story. We can choose to read the story in a way that honours and remembers that Mary was young. That Mary was afraid. That Mary was uncertain about her own future as well as the future of her unborn child. That Mary was perplexed by her own situation. That Mary needed time to reflect and to ponder. A Mary that was not perfect. A Mary that did not need to be perfect.

If we read the story of Mary in that way, then we just might have to accept the fact that we can relate to Mary ourselves. We know what it is like to feel fear. We know what it is like to face an uncertain future. We know what it's like to be on a path that our friends and family do not accept. We know what it is like to feel fear for our children. We know what it is like to be perplexed, to feel the need to get away and reflect on things.

In fact, if we read the story that way, we might relate to it a little too well. We might even end up asking ourselves just how open we ourselves are to hearing messages from God. We might even end up asking ourselves how best we should invite God into our lives, and let God open our lives to new directions.

But we usually want to resist that. We don't want to imagine that we have the capacity to do amazing things. We'd rather believe that those actions come to particular, special, people - the Mary's of the world. We'd rather put Mary on a pedestal as final proof that - of course - people like you and I cannot do God's work ourselves. It's so much easier to simply imagine that we have nothing to offer. We are small. We are poor. We are powerless. Surely we are not expected to begin new things. Surely we are not expected to bring the Kingdom of God to earth here. Surely, not us!

The Australian comedy team the "Axis of Awesome" have a song about that. Well, it's not about Mary, it's about Jesus. But it speaks to our desire to believe that we are too powerless to contribute to God's kingdom, and that we are justified when we do nothing

at all. It's a song that responds to the whole "What would Jesus do" movement. I won't sing it, but some of the words are, "You can't do what Jesus can do. there are 3 of him and their's only one of you. He had 12 disciples, and no one follows you. So next time you're in trouble, thinking "what would Jesus do". Try not to forget he's a million trillion billion times better than you." Now that's a de-motivational speech.

I wonder if we are touched by that attitude here too. Right here at Chapel in the Park United Church. Do we ever feel that we are too small, or too poor, or too old, or too powerless to make a difference in the lives of those around us? Relax. I don't know you well enough to answer that question.

But certainly in other congregations that I've been part of ... I have often heard the words that are repeated so often that they are practically a liturgy We can't do this or we can't do that. And that liturgy was reinforced many times over by the pandemic. The pandemic certainly took the wind out of the sails of many United Church congregations.

But the pandemic also create new opportunities for us. Well, I'm not sure they are really new. But the pandemic shifted the balance. To the point where the World Health Organization actually declared loneliness to be a "global public health concern" last month. "Currently, 1 in 4 older people experience social isolation". And this is likely an under-estimate. "Social isolation and loneliness affect both physical and mental health. It is associated with up to a 50% increase in dementia and 30% increase in strokes and cardiovascular diseases."¹ The CBC ran an article this week that picked up on the theme, and declared that loneliness is linked to obesity as well as dementia.²

Churches - which are also called "communities of faith" are natural places to combat loneliness. We are - or at least we can be - places of inclusion and belonging. We might not be able to do what Jesus could do, but we can definitely make a difference to people around here.

All of our churches are less "able" than we were decades ago. We are older. We

¹ <https://globalnews.ca/news/10095898/loneliness-global-public-health-concern-who/>

² <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/social-networks-are-key-to-good-health-that-has-some-doctors-seeking-strategies-to-cure-loneliness-1.7062920>

are weaker in a variety of ways. But our model for ministry is the ministry of Jesus. And Jesus did not have a ministry of domination. Jesus had a ministry of weakness and vulnerability. The ministry of Jesus was not about being powerful. The ministry of Jesus was about being present with others. And that is something we can actually do!

And if we want to connect with the vulnerable in our own community we can do that best when we acknowledge our own vulnerability first. Our feelings of weakness are actually a gift.

The good news of Advent is that Jesus came. But the even better news of Advent is that Jesus came as a helpless baby, not as a rich powerful waring king. The even better news of Advent is that Jesus came to an unwed teenager, not to the matriarch of the village or the matriarch of the synagogue. The good news of Advent is that God is with us. But the even better news of Advent is that Jesus came in a time of poverty, not a time of wealth. The even better news of Advent is that Jesus came to a land of impoverishment, not to a land of indulgence.

If Jesus's birth happened today, I have no trouble imagining Jesus being born right here in the Thorncliffe Park neighbourhood. And I have no trouble imaging Jesus being born during a pandemic, or a war.

The good new of Advent is that God is with us. But the even better news of Advent is that we engage in the story as we accept our own weakness and vulnerability.

Or perhaps even more miraculously - Jesus can be born right here - in your heart - in my heart - in the heart of this community right here.

God is with us - Emmanuel! That's Advent. There really is nothing more to say. All that is left is for us to live it. We are already who we need to be. We are already where we need to be. We just need to understand that Advent is actually a verb.

We can do this! I am looking forward to a great 2024.

Amen.