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Advent #4: All generations will call me vulnerable  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
December 21, 2025  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 1:39-56

Today, I want to talk about Mary. You know, the mother of Jesus? Yes, I realize that this is a radical topic, especially in the United Church of Canada. Because in the United Church we have often followed with Protestant tradition. And have given Mary very little space in our worship or in our hearts. Historically - this was partly tied to a distrust of Roman Catholics. And that was often because of inaccurate views that we held on how Roman Catholics thought of Mary. And so we have often given Mary very little space. Other than having her stuffed into a manger in a Christmas pageant. Often without a speaking role. Often being told to look demure and keep quiet. We have even minimized talking about Mary. But this is Advent. And Advent is all about change.

I'm sure that some of you struggle to believe what I just said about our view of Roman Catholics. We are open-minded people, right? We share this sanctuary with St Edith Stein, a Roman Catholic congregation. Some of our members are former Roman Catholics. Some of our members are in fact still Roman Catholic.

But historically we are not very far removed from animosity with Roman Catholics. I only recently learned that in 1578 the city of Amsterdam actually banned Catholicism completely. That led to Catholic places of worship being hidden away in attics, and likely other places.

[image: Our Lord in the Attic exterior]

One famous example is the "Our Lord in the Attic". I may have the wrong exterior photo here. But Roman Catholic Churches were certainly build into attics in buildings like this.

[image Our Lord of the Attic interior]

Here is an interior shot. After Catholicism was banned, Roman Catholics did not simply worship in attics. They created beautiful sanctuaries in those attics. They created spaces where their faith could thrive. Legislation has never really prevented Christian worship. People just need to get creative. Whether it's Our Lord in the Attic or Chapel in

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the Basement. But I digress.

[image: emmanuel college]

Sadly, we do not need to back to 1578 so see this animosity between Protestants and Roman Catholics. When I was in seminary, they often gave us old books and asked us to read them, or specific parts of them. This was one way for us to not completely be out of touch with our past. Some of the books we were asked to return. And some of the books we were free to keep.

One book I had no interest in keeping was from 1954. It was called “What’s the difference?”. The subtitle was something like, “exploring the differences between Protestant and Roman Catholic beliefs”.

The title of the book suggested a rational, thought-provoking consideration of how Protestant and Roman Catholic beliefs differ. I also imagined that the book would include a discussion of how amazingly similar we are too. I even imagined that the book would help bridge the historic rift between Roman Catholics and Protestants.

But this was 1954. And history rarely disappoints. The title suggested an expansive view of theology. Perhaps an invitation to broaden our own faith by learning from each other. However, the contents of the book did not match the cover. Page after page was filled with inaccurate straw-man understandings of Catholicism. “What’s the difference?” Was actually code for “Why Protestants are right!” The book should really have been titled “Why Catholics are wrong!” That was 1954.

Of course, the professors at seminary were not idiots. They gave us books like that so that we would react to what we were reading. They made us read that material for at least 2 reasons:

1. When we returned the books during class, students were invited to share their observations. I believe I was the most loquacious student that day. I myself have attended numerous spiritual retreats at Catholic retreat centres. Marjorie and I participated in a “Engaged Encounter” retreat at a Catholic retreat centre as part of our preparation for marriage. I had a Catholic girlfriend at one time. Anyway, after the students had calmed down a bit (which took awhile) the professor said that we had all likely skipped over the one page that would have made the book make

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sense. The prologue of the book - which I had certainly not bothered to read - listed the editorial board that had produced the book. They were all Protestant! That was a warning to how we read our own history. And a reminder that echo chambers existed long before we had social media.

2. The second warning was even more pointed. We - hopeful ministerial types that we were - we told that after we get into a pulpit, some of our flock will actually agree with the sentiments of the book. And I have found that to be true in every single congregation I've been in ministry with - including this one.

But this is Advent. And Advent is all about change. We can move past our historical animosity with Roman Catholics. And a big part of that concerns how we think about Mary.

[image: Mary jetpack]

Let's be honest. The Church has given us a fairly unrealistic image of Mary to begin with. Just go online and look for images of Mary and you'll see what I mean. Like images of Mary where light is coming out of her .... as if she is levitating.

And you might have your own reaction to Mary statues and iconography. Just look around this sanctuary and we see some (not all) of the visuals that our friends at St. Edith Stein find important for their own worship. And just to be clear - I am absolutely delighted that we are able to share space with St. Edith Stein. But I do often ask myself ... who was Mary, really.

[image: Mary quiet]

The Mary we meet in the Bible is interesting. In Luke, Mary is 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 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."

In our reading from Luke today, however, Mary does not ponder. 10 verses after Mary "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

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what was happening to her. When we consider these stories together I feel like someone flipped over too many pages at once. There must be a piece missing. A part of the story where Mary spent time reflecting on the news and reacting to it. Perhaps a period of incredulity. Part of the story where Mary was freaking out. 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? ....". She takes it all in stride.

[image: Mary demure]

And what are we to do with this image that we have been given 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 intense stress wrote the magnificat instead of reaching for a bottle of Prozac like you and I would have done.

[image: Mary silent]

I'm sorry to tell you this - but I cannot relate to that 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 was. 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 bizarre assignment. A Mary who exhibited courage - in a way - but that courage seems to cost her nothing. I feel like the real, human Mary is in the story, but she has been buried in it somewhere beyond our sight.

Not only that. But after Mary gives birth to Jesus she is largely removed from the story completely. Elizabeth and Mary are important figures - up to the point when they deliver John and Jesus. And then they disappear from the story. In Matthew, after Jesus is born, Mary is only ever referred to as "his mother". Mary's humanity has been surgically removed from the narrative.

If you think I'm being harsh, let me ask you. What is Mary's favourite colour? What is her favourite food? What does Mary enjoy doing in her spare time? Exactly. Well, that's history for you. You know HIS-story. The Bible was written by men after all.

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[image: Mary from ChatGPT]

So perhaps this Advent, we can do our best to try to reclaim Mary. Not to restore her to the position she enjoys in Catholicism. Not to simply remember her as someone we need for a Christmas pageant.

But to try - as best we can - to imagine Mary as a living, breathing, feeling human being. Perhaps as an unmarried pregnant, scared young person. A person who exhibited courage at great cost. She would have suffered loss of control. Social exposure if not ridicule. She would have been a victim to the rumour mill of the day. She gave birth to love, and love always comes at a cost.

I do not believe in the perfect Mary. But I do believe in a Mary who was an unmarried, pregnant, 13 or 14 year old girl. I believe in a Mary who was afraid and confused. I believe in a Mary who did not really know that everything would be alright in the end. I believe in a Mary who just like us lives with both hopes and fears, strengths and frailties, faith and reality. I believe in a Mary who did not have to be perfect in order to be a blessing to others. I believe in a Mary who is a lot like all of us.

[image: vulnerability ahead]

Mary did not have to be perfect. But she did have to make space to be vulnerable. She had to be vulnerable enough to work with reality as it unfolded. To be open to miracle. To be open to wonder. To be open to love. And ultimately, to be open to good news.

Mary's faith was not heroic because she was so calm. Her faith was heroic because she was willing to be vulnerable.

Imagine Mary not accepting that reality. Imagine Mary saying, "I don't want kids". Imagine Mary saying, "I wanted a girl!". Mary was open to God however God showed up. Mary had to be vulnerable in order to be blessed.

[image: Mary statue]

And perhaps that is how we can relate to Mary ourselves. In Luke this morning Mary said, "all generations will call me blessed, for the mighty one has done great things for me"<sup>1</sup>. But can't most of us can also say "the mighty one has done great things for

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:48b-49a.

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me”. Can’t we? Do we not also feel loved by God? Do we not feel blessed ourselves?

If we do not, perhaps it is because we are not open to God however God shows up. Here. Today. If we are not willing to be vulnerable like Mary, it is not likely that we will see God in our midst because we will be looking for something too narrow. Too specific. We have to be open to possibility. We have to be open to experience. We have to be vulnerable.

In my mind, Mary should have said, “all generations will call me vulnerable. And because I made myself vulnerable, I was able to embrace God in my midst.” And that is something that each of us can do ourselves.

During this Advent, we have used a lot of traditional language. In our hymns, our carols, our prayers. But I want to unpack one piece of language that is often misunderstood. We claim - and I have done this myself - I’m not blaming any of you. But we claim that - during Advent - we are waiting for God to appear in our midst, right?

I’ll tell you a secret. God is already here. Shhhh. Don’t tell anyone or they won’t come on Christmas Eve. But here’s the thing - we are still waiting. So what exactly are we waiting for? We are waiting to recognize God in our midst. The searching still matters. But it has more to do with searching our own hearts. God is already here. The only real question is whether or not we recognize God in our day to day lives.

Christmas Day is only 4 days away. Have you been finding God in your midst? I certainly hope so. But if not, considering opening yourself to being more vulnerable this week. Put away expectations from your past and open yourself to the God who is already here. Be open to God wherever, whenever, and however God shows up.

What we learn from the nativity stories is that God does not show up in ways that we expect. Jesus was not born in a palace - he was born in a stable. We need to be open to the unexpected. We need be vulnerable. When we look with openness, God still shows up. Thanks be to God.

As we enter the final week of Advent, open yourselves to recognizing the divine in your midst.

*Amen.*