“The Dawn Draws Near”

Luke 1:39-45

Part IV of VI in “A Light to the Nations” Advent Sermon Series

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From the Pulpit
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Prayer for Illumination: Gracious God, as we turn to your Word for us, may the Spirit of God rest upon us. Help us to be steadfast in our hearing, in our speaking, in our believing, and in our living. Amen.

One of my favorite Advent Hymns this time of year is The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came. Stanza Three of that hymn describes Mary as such: *Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head, to me be as it pleaseth God,” she said.*¹

**Ah,** Gentle Mary, mild, meek, handmaiden of the Lord, head bowed in reverence. This has been the predominant view of Mary, and not without reason. Our hymns are full of such images.

*Gentle Mary laid her child,* according to another hymn.

*In the bleak winter,* speaks of the maiden’s bliss.

*Mary was that mother mild,* we sing in *Once in Royal David’s City.*

**Gentle, Meek, Mild.**

So even in Scripture, when Mary asks, “How will it be that this child will come to me?

The angel Gabriel answers, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you? Mary is overshadowed by God’s power.

It’s the same overshadowing that happens during the transfiguration of Jesus.

- The disciples are on the high mountain and a cloud comes and covers them…Overshadows them.
- They enter the cloud in that story. They were so frightened that they are stunned into silence.

So yes, Mary is an instrument of God, but God will overshadow her. She will be cloaked, covered in God’s power.

It’s no wonder that Gentle and Meekness have been two of Mary’s defining characteristics.

She, overshadowed?

She’s barely visible.

But today, if you read a little further in our text – in the next verses, from Mary’s encounter with Elizabeth we read The Song of Mary, what is referred to as *The Magnificat*.

Usually suitable for a lullaby, delicate, fitting for a gentle Mary who meekly bows her head.

Hear these words and decide for yourself if these are the words of a gentle and meek Mary.

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour 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.

His mercy is for those who fear him
From generation to generation.

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

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 for ever.’

So much for hiding in an overshadowing cloud!!!

The Magnificat doesn’t sound like a lullaby from one who is docile,
meek and mild, concealed in a cloud of God’s power.

NO! – It’s a song of revolution and a celebration of Mary’s own unique role. It sounds a lot like Mary knew.

Oh, Mary knew. She didn’t waste any time going there, to the heart of the message to which God calls her.
She knew that her baby boy would one day rule the nations,

   Oh, she knew, that he would be Lord of all creation.²

**The Magnificat is Mary’s “Yes” to participating in God’s story.**

Mary’s words resonate with the persistent theme of the Hebrew Scriptures:

   – With words of Miriam, Hannah and others.

**It’s the theme of God choosing the powerless and poor to make known God’s purposes for humankind.**

In Mary’s time there is the conviction that the poor, the hungry and those without power and influence are favored over the strong, the wealthy and those with high social status.

Mary is not a passive tool for God’s plan although God’s power is central here. But Mary has an active role to play, and she claims it. Her song is an enthusiastic “YES!”

**My soul magnifies the Lord.**

   Other translations say, “My soul glorifies, exalts, praises the Lord”

   This is the Magnificat. Mary’s life magnifies God.

Like a magnifying glass, Mary’s life magnifies the work of God.

Magnify – Make Larger. Make Larger the mighty acts of God.
Through her we see who God is. A life of faithfulness brings God’s gracious intentions into the world.

*Into Sharper focus.

*Into Greater Detail.

**This is our call in Advent as well.**

It’s all well and good to sing God’s praises and glorify God, to exalt God and we are certainly good at that this time of year.

**But** Mary urges us not to stop at praise.

**How are our lives magnifying God? When people look through us, through the lens of our lives, what do they see?**

**Do they see God more clearly?** In order for us to magnify God, we must be clear ourselves.

**If our lenses are clouded up, any image of God will get clouded up.**

**In fact, magnifiers of God are called upon to be transparent.**

Many people this time of year tell me how hollow the Pre-Christmas revelry seems to be. The ubiquitous decorations, the 24-hour radio stations playing chirpy Holiday songs, world without end. It’s as if in the midst of a world constantly at war with itself, we just need jolly Christmas cheer, and we are going to fake our way through this.

**But if we are to be magnifiers of God’s reality then we are called to be transparent in the face of all that.**
To be real and when real for you is depressed.  
Or sad when you face the first Christmas without your loved one.  
or dismayed at what Christmas has become,  
then we have to tell the truth about that.  

**And the church has to be a place where that can be named.**

**And as magnifiers of God,** we need to align with God’s purposes for the world and if not – we are magnifying all the wrong things. We have to be aligned to God’s purpose for us in the world.

We have to acknowledge – there are people in pain and deep need.  
Communities under seize with gun violence.  
Houses of Worship destroyed by powerful and deadly storms.  
Health Care workers – facing yet another surge of the pandemic  
Grief beyond grief.

Mary’s Song acknowledges this as well. Although she begins by singing what God has done in her life **SHE MOVES QUICKLY** to the brokenness of the world.

*Mary sings for the weak, the lowly, the poor, the hungry.*  
*Every hurting son is now her son.*  
*Every daughter, her daughter.*  
She bears them in her own body as she carries her own son in her body.  
Before they were among her, and now they dwell within her.
That song erupts from the place deep down where she carries them.

Because the Magnificat is more than a proud YES –

- **It is a song of defiance.**  
- It is a spiritual in the vein of “We Shall Over Come”  
- It’s a protest song.

It is a counter testimony to the dysfunction that passes as normal in our world.

Mary sings this song because her pregnancy itself is a counter testimony to the world.

God did not choose a queen, a woman of noble birth and status.

God chose a young, peasant woman. God assessed the demands of the world and expectations of a King that might come in power and might and said, “Nope, I don’t think so.” And in her song, Mary reaffirms a divine NO!

- NO – to the proud and their delusions of greatness.  
- NO – to the powerful who remain complacent.  
- NO - to the hunger that remains unfed.  
- NO – to suffering that goes unrelieved.  
- NO–NO–NO!

The word NO is sharp. A laser point.

Remember a magnifying glass, a magnifier, not only makes things look larger,  
- but catches sunlight and focuses it in such a way as to start a fire.
That is a power of prophet witness.

Every time we say no, then the fires of the spirit are called again.

A Pentecost moment, right in the middle of Advent.

**NO** is just as much a part of Mary’s Magnificat as **YES** is.

This, too, is a call during Advent. Our cultures way of doing Christmas clatters noisily against our church’s observance of Advent.

Mary knows there is not much time, O she knows. She cuts right to the places that need the world’s attention and she doesn’t hold back. Amid the hustle, we dare to sing, O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

And why do we ask the savior to come? Not to create some false dramatic build up to December 25th, wondering if he will come? Of course, he will come and right on time.

We bid the savior come because **we still need a savior**.

- The World still needs healing and hope.
- Stories of hurt and violence and oppression are still too prevalent and remind us of this reality.
- We need to be reminded that through the darkest of nights and in the loneliest of places, the dawn draws near.
  - The dawn of a new day.
  - The dawn of a more perfect union
  - The dawn of a reconciled community
  - The dawn of a new creation
  - A light to the nations
  - The world turned upside down
And so, we sing with Mary, defiantly, expectantly, confident in the God who shows strength and mercy. In hope for the day when we will all be free.

We sing God’s Jubilant YES and God’s defiant NO. And in our song, may God be Magnified. Amen.

1 Source: http://www.lyricsondemand.com/christmascarols/t/theangelgabriellyrics.html
2 A shout out to the Twitter Meme of “Mary Freaking Knew.” A challenge from colleagues and parishioner to add it in to the sermon.
3 Simon Reynolds Lighten our Darkness: Discovering and celebrating Choral Evensong. DLT: 2021; 76.
4 With thanks to my colleague for her inspiration on this text, used with permission. Rev. Mary Ann McKibben Dana, A sermon every Sunday. https://asermonforeverysunday.com/sermons/c04-the-fourth-sunday-of-advent-year-c-2018/