

*A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent III, December 15, 2013, dedicated to Malala Yousafzai, to Mary the mother of Jesus and all young girls and women who fight for human rights and women's rights across the world and always to the glory of God!*

# **“I am Mary”**

**Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:39-55; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11**

**Part III of VI in the sermon series:  
“The Salvation of the Lord”**

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of your hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.*

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Today's texts are an amazing amalgamation of lyrical prophetic poetry and powerful narrative pointing to the transformation of humanity and all creation. That is a lot to absorb this third Sunday of Advent. Let's look closer.

In Isaiah 35, God transforms, restores and rescues creation and disabled humanity in our poetic prophets words. In Luke 1:49-55, (found partially in our call to worship), Mary's Song of Praise exalts the coming birth of Jesus and proclaims the power of God to turn an unjust the world upside-down and set humanity right again. James tells us to be patient with one another for none other than the Salvation of the world is on his way! In the time between

now and then, do not to grumble against each other because the Judge of the Universe is standing at our door. Moreover, he says, "Take the old prophets as your mentors. They put up with anything, went through everything, and never once quit, all the time honoring God. What a gift life is to those who stay the course" (James 5:10-11, The Message). Wow! And Matthew's Gospel reveals a narrative from Death Row in which the soon-to-be beheaded John the Baptizer, wants to know if his work is in vain or if Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus tells John's disciples, "You tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to poor have good news brought to them. The one who is blessed is one who takes no offense at me."

Prophetic poetry pointing toward healing of humanity and creation, daily tips for living into God's salvation, transformational narrative about a faith that really matters, how many times do we come to church and get all of this packed into 32 verses from four scriptural texts on one Sunday morning? This is better than a tin of Christmas cookies and a box of fudge all in one! Fewer calories, too!

The song of Mary is our first and oldest Advent Hymn. It is also the most passionate, honest, direct, vehement and revolutionary Advent hymn ever written and ever sung. No hymnal carries Mary's words with revolutionary tunes, although there is still time to match them if someone is courageous enough to put powerful music to revolutionary words! I recommend starting with Les Miserables for musical measures of power in sound.

Mary's song is no gentle, sweet, dreamy teenage Juliet singing about love. Here we hear no glowing, sugary, demure Mary seen in paintings through the ages. This 14 year old country girl doesn't look like much, but watch out when she starts singing! She intones all the tunes and echoes of powerful and prophetic women in the Hebrew Scriptures. You can hear Deborah, Judith, Miriam, and Esther come out prophetically in the song of Mary.

In Mary, we see and hear the passionate, powerful, proud, enthusiastic, uncompromising Mother of God. She magnifies God and God's glory in her voice. We can see exactly why God chose this teenage girl to bear, birth, and raise-up and teach Jesus. We see why Mary is the right choice to be the mom of God's beloved son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. God chose Mary because she was strong, able, open, and she was in love with God. Best of all, God knew she would be in love with His son, too. She would follow him from cradle to cross to grave to resurrection and ascension and live to tell the story to all the nations of the world.

She sings of a revolutionary God! Her God (our God) will knock rulers off their thrones. God will humble the proud, raise up the humble. God will fill the hunger of the needy and makes the rich who created hunger conditions regret their greedy decisions. This revolution is moral. It is social. It is economic.

It is moral because God scatters the proud from the plans of their prideful hearts. God knocks them off their high horses and makes them walk through life.

It is social because God casts down the mighty and exalts the humble. God sees no difference between rich and poor. Titles don't matter. Degrees don't matter. All the extra letters we attach to our names don't matter. We are only known by our baptisms. Our resume is simple. We are all children of the living God. There are not common men and women and socially exalted ones. We are all one in Christ.

It is also an economic revolution. God fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty. This is not happy news to those who like things just like they are. But, for those who have never had a chance before, these words ring true. They sing to the heart and soul of justice in God's realm ("three revolutions" are drawn from William Barclay's Commentary on Luke, 1:45-55). Moral, social and economic revolution. You see why God chooses Mary. In Mary, God's instrument of mercy and justice, God enters the manger at Bethlehem with the intent of changing the world, not merely to create a pretty Christmas card scene. If we want to

participate in Advent, in Christmas or in life as Christians, we cannot be like spectators in the theatre or in this sanctuary.

We have to be participants in the drama.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us in a sermon delivered December 17, 1933 in London England that the manger and the cross are the two pivot points in the Christ story. He writes: There are only two places where the powerful and great in the world lose their courage, tremble in the depth of their souls, and become truly afraid. These are the manger and the cross of Jesus Christ. No man of violence dares to approach the manger; even King Herod did not risk that. For it is here that the thrones tumble, the mighty fall, and the high and mighty ones are put down, because God is with the lowly. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christmas Sermons, editor and translator, Edwin Robertson, Zondervan Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005, pp. 102).

Remember, there are only two who were present at the manger and the cross. They are Mary and Jesus. No one else. In these two, God comes to us with world changing purpose and the promise of hope.

I have been wondering in these days leading up to Christmas, what does Mary look like in our times? Then I saw her.

Mary looks like Malala Yousafzai – a Muslim Pakistani teenager from Mingora, in the main city of Swat, a northern province of Pakistan – not far from Afghanistan. You may know her. Malala is now 16 years old and recently published a 300 page book telling the story of life. She is the beautiful girl who stood up and spoke out for education for all girls and all boys in Pakistan. Dressed in pink, this diminutive powerhouse has spoken to the General Assembly of The United Nations and this year was nominated as the youngest person ever for a Nobel Peace Prize. Her hymn of praise for education for all almost cost Malala her life.

On Tuesday, October 9, 2012, while riding home on a bus with all her female classmates following their exams, the bus was

stopped and boarded by the Taliban. The terrorist demanded, “Who is Malala?” as he brandished a black pistol. No one said anything. But, several girls looked at Malala. She was the only girl with her face not covered. He lifted his Colt 45, pointed it at Malala’s forehead and fired three times. The first shot entered her left eye socket and went out under her left shoulder. The second and third shots missed – hitting her best friends with injuries they have survived.

After opening her book with the fateful day in October, Malala Yousafzai writes, “Who is Malala? I am Malala and this is my story” (I am Malala, Little Brown, NY, NY, October 2013, p. 9). Malala was shot because her father ran a school to educate young girls. She was shot because she spoke out at rallies for girls and their education. She was shot because she said that Allah believes in the sanctity and dignity of all children, that all children (not just male children) should be educated and given opportunities to grow and flourish in life.

In Malala’s words, “All girls should read and write. As it says in the Quran, God wants us all to have knowledge. He wants us to know why the sky is blue and about the oceans and stars.” In a world where 57 million children don’t even get a primary education – 32 million of them are girls – this must change. In her country of Pakistan, 5.1 million children don’t even go to primary school even though their constitution says it is their right to do so. 50 million people in Pakistan are illiterate. 2/3rds of them are women – including Malala’s own mother.

She wanted to be tall – like her father. She wanted a few extra inches. But, Malala realized that God had more important plans for her life. Instead of a few inches, (in her words) - “God raised her to heights as tall as the sky” (Ibid, p. 313). Now, like Mary, Malala writes and sings her own Hymn of Praise to God.

I love my God. I thank my Allah. I talk to him all day. He is the greatest. By giving me this height to reach people, he has given me great responsibilities. Peace in every home, every street, every village, every country – this is my dream. Education for every boy

and every girl in the world. To sit down on a chair and read my books with all my friends at school is my right. To see each and every human being with a smile of happiness is my wish. I am Malala. My world has changed but I have not (Ibid).

This week on our Advent walk, I implore each one of us to light the Pink (Rose) candle in our Advent wreathes each night and say a prayer of thanksgiving for women – starting with Mary and Malala. Each night, let us say a prayer for women and girls who are oppressed and forgotten around the world. Let us say a prayer for all who are sex slaves and caught in the web of human trafficking. Let us say a prayer for the migrant working women in our country who pick tomatoes from sun up to sundown and do not earn a living wage – making less than \$10,000 a year for their labor. Let us say a prayer for brave women who stand up, speak out, sing to God a new song and declare freedom and liberation are God's cause.

Let us take Mary's words to heart – that God is bringing a moral, social and economic revolution to this world through the birth of her son, our savior, Jesus Christ. Let's sing Mary's revolutionary lullaby to Jesus in the dirt and straw of the cave of Bethlehem rather than placing her high up in the crèche where little children can't even see her, let alone feel her powerful presence.

Come to the Manger with Mary when she hears that women, children and men on our city and our streets have no place to call home, no meal for Christmas, no family, no friends. You know she would be here kneeling down low - singing songs of hope with our sisters and brothers at Bethlehem on Broad Street. Stand with Mary when she hears that health care for millions of the poorest Ohioans is within reach, but politicians and their politics keep women and children outside of needed care. I ask, "What would Mary sing about that?" Stand with Mary on this anniversary of Newtown's mass murder and the anniversary of Chris Mondiek falling to his death when innocent ones are taken from us and after the cameras are gone, mothers and fathers are left alone in their grief.

Remember – there is a reason why Christian men and women of faith down through the ages have chosen Mary as their prayer partner and their model of faith. Mary is fearless, God-filled, protective, and loving. She believes in and worships a God who defends the defenseless; loves the loveless; brings grace to the ungraced; and humbles the proud. She believes in and worships a God who lifts the fallen and knocks down the proud and powerful. She believes in and worships the God who is her son's Father.

Let us live the Song of the Mother of God in our Lives and thus participate in changing of the world – then we will know the salvation of the Lord. Amen.

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