

St. Paul's Congregational Church
December 23, 2018, Advent 4C
Micah 5: 2 – 5a; Luke 1: 39 - 45
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

After three weeks of preaching from Jesus and John the Baptist, those prophets out of the wilderness: warnings about world-shaking events containing part judgment, and warnings to get our lives turned around in preparation for what is to come: today, we meet two more prophets: this time, women with names and stories, women with voices with something to say, or in Mary's case, something to sing.

In Luke's Gospel, his emphasis on women, the marginalized, and the Holy Spirit is clear in the birth stories, including this one. In this short passage, the prophetic words of these two women who are filled with the Holy Spirit, give voice to those who are lowly, like the shepherds to whom the angels later announce the birth of Jesus. The stage is set this week, then, for us to have the rare opportunity to hear from the women and children for a change. And what a change they dream of!

Advent speaks of awaiting God's help in the midst of desperation, reminding us that we can find echoes of Advent as clearly in the homeless shelter, the Food Pantry, maybe even in the government – in our homes, in so many other places in our world. And don't we know we need God's help to get us through these days!

Advent calls to us in the midst of the weight on our shoulders, and it speaks hope. As we watch the news and see the pain in the world, we are faced with our own powerlessness. That was certainly true for me last week – I had to get away from the news – I had to get away from the chaos – I had to get away from all the “stuff” I had to do - I desperately wanted to hear that message of hope. So I went to the Food Pantry Christmas distribution – I brought the food you've donated here and took 4 bags of new toys donated by a law firm where a dear friend works – initially I wasn't going to stay for the distribution, but all that changed. The regular distribution crew was there, people who have become good friends after working together for nearly a year - gearing up for a bigger than usual crowd – so I settled in with them, bagging fruit, vegetables, bread, setting out handmade scarves and toiletry bags – all donated – by people in the community. The toys were set out on shelves – families would be invited to take a toy for each child in

their home. And over 100 brand new stuffed animals were displayed for the taking as well. It was a hive of activity as we got ready.

Then the doors opened and our guests came through – going home laden with toys, stuffed animals, turkeys, fruits, vegetables, lots of non-perishable food items – good thing we had people there to help them take their bounty to their cars.

Because of the time of distribution, we don't often see the children there – they're still in school - but there was one little girl who came with her parents – she spotted a “Frozen” doll on the shelf and clutched it tightly. And she took a “lambchop” stuffed animal – remember those? I helped her put them in a bag and she had the most wonderful smile for me, for her parents, and all the other volunteers – her eyes were sparkling – her parents could barely contain themselves offering thanks. And her little voice saying “thank you” warmed me to the bone.

All the noise of the news, the chaos of the season, of the day fell away at that moment – all of us working got such strength from this family and from all the others who stopped everything to say thank you – of course, we don't do this for thanks – we do this because Jesus tells us to – but knowing that the light of hope was fanned – that was enough. That's what Advent is about – that's what the coming of Christ into the world is about – to call each of us to care, to call each of us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Advent is here to remind us that we cannot save ourselves, but that there is yet hope.

Today, with four candles lit, the Song of Mary soars through the Gospel reading and into our hearts again, as it does every year.

Mary, the unwed mother, the fiancé of a poor carpenter. Mary, who knows depths of desperation that many of us will never have to know. Mary, who felt herself powerless but sang to God who was about to save the whole world.

We often think of Mary as gentle and meek, but today, Mary is brave and bold, singing loud and strong.

Everything — the very shape of human history — is about to change. The new dawn is on the way, and Mary sings out to greet it. The weight lessens; hope is born.

Hope is the only thing stronger than fear. A little hope is effective. A lot of hope can't be contained! Hope is more than just optimism – a lot of hope can shake the foundations of everything that weighs us down. A lot of hope can change the course of history.

Think about Mary: she doesn't initially greet the news of her pregnancy with her soaring song and blazing hope. When Luke's Gospel

first introduces us to Mary, she is more like the traditional image of Mary — young, meek, seemingly timid, but ultimately faithful. When the angel tells her the news, she consents, but she’s not singing yet.

As she’s absorbing the news from the angel Gabriel that she will conceive and bear a child, he tells her, perhaps to console her: Elizabeth, your relative, is pregnant too, even in her old age!

Gabriel doesn’t actually tell Mary to go to Elizabeth, but Luke says she still “made haste” to go to the Judean town in the hill country to see her.

Mary wants to be near someone who understands. Elizabeth is also pregnant by a miracle. Elizabeth, Mary knows, won’t think she’s crazy. And here, with another human being who understands that God works in really weird and unexpected and direct ways, Mary is able to find the courage to sing her song of hope. Not ordinary optimism, but great hope. The kind that catches fire. The kind that sings loud.

Today, Mary sings as she invites us into the vulnerable territory of daring to hope big. Optimism looks behind us to find comfort in what we’ve experienced before. But hope — the big, world-shaking, musical hope of Mary — looks ahead, knowing that we cannot imagine what God is able to do.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with optimism. Optimism hopes for good fortune, for fun with friends and family during the holidays, for a blessed and happy new year, and for love and warmth to surround us. There is nothing wrong with optimistic Advent cheer.

But if you have experienced the depths of despair, if you have seen the pain that exists in the world, you know that optimism is not enough on its own. It is too difficult to sustain. The world is too broken, too violent, and too divided, and we alone cannot fix it. Our one spark of hope is that God has spoken and told us that someday, all things — all things — from our personal struggles to the weight of the world’s pain, shall be made right. That hope is why Mary sings.

Today, the Gospel story invites us, like Mary, to seek out others in order to find our song of hope. It wasn’t until Mary was with Elizabeth in the Judean hills that her hope burst into song. And maybe, whether we know it or not, that’s what we’ve done today, too. We have made haste to seek one another out, to gather together here too so that we, too, can sing songs of hope.

Our song is one of extraordinary hope. Hope that has seen the broken and divided state of the world and knows that it cannot afford to hope too small because we cannot repair the world on our own. Only God can, and only God will. In the meantime, we are called to make our corner of the

world that God so loves a less divided, more trustworthy, more hopeful place. We are called to sing.

The best part about Mary's song of hope is that it is never hope unfulfilled. Every year, we remember her bold song to remind ourselves that God has already broken through. Even in the darkness, even in the deepest disappointments, even when we are betrayed, and even when the world looks most broken, we keep this crazy hope alive that God has and God will break through. And today, we make haste to find each other to sing that hope again, to fan that spark into flame again.

We are now in the last week of Advent, on the verge of another Christmas celebration, learning from Mary, Fred Craddock says, to "stand expectantly at hope's window." Some of us look back longingly on Christmases past, hoping to re-create better, more secure, less troubled times. Many folks are grieving or depressed or lonely during the holiday season, and the church's call, indeed our call here at St. Paul's, is to tell the story once again, to comfort and inspire and just be with those who need help in looking forward in hope.

The development of hope within community takes time, takes effort. How many are feeling discouraged, feeling hopeless right here, right now? How many people might be here, sitting in the pews, awaiting an opportunity, yearning to connect more deeply with the people around them? How many long to connect their small story with the larger stories of God?

How is God at work in the life of this congregation? In what ways does it make a difference that we listen for God's word in community rather than alone? How have we, together, deepened our faith in ways we might not have experienced in isolation? What is your greatest hope as another Advent season comes to an end?

In the season of Advent, our waiting is accompanied by beautiful and treasured music: there is a power of Christmas carols to speak to our dark places - times of wandering from God and wondering about God. Maybe this is why this music is so beloved, so imprinted on our hearts and souls as Mary's own song was part of who she was.

In a world that longs for a gentle peace, a generous sharing of the goods of the earth, a time of quiet joy and healing, we stand by that window with Mary, expectant with hope and filled to the brim with joy – we have seen in every moment of tender love and forgiveness the promise of what is yet to come. We sing with Mary, welcoming the goodness of God into that world, and into our lives as well.

Advent and Christmas are here every year to remind us that God has already broken through. Despite the world's pain, the dawn is well on the

way. Every year, Christmas always arrives. Even if we are exhausted or brokenhearted, the Light of Christ always comes to the Church. Always. The final candle is always lit.

So, let us today find one another and sing our hearts out to the God who breaks through, who sustains our lives, and who dares us to hope big — and beckons us to sing loud. Amen.