

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
 December 17, 2017; Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:47-55  
 Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

This week I was talking with my brother, also a minister, serving a church just a little bigger than St. Paul's in northern Connecticut. Well, we started talking about the politics of the day: and I could feel my stomach tightening up, my mood changing, my frustration level increasing, my sense of fairness being challenged, my disgust as yet more allegations of misconduct surface, my patience at an all time low listening to the blather from both the politicians and newscasters – and much of it is just that.

He said something about this being the Sunday of Advent when we light the candle of joy – and how hard it was for him to feel that joy. I had to admit I was feeling the same way – instead of feeling joy, I was feeling overwhelmed: by the fact that we still haven't closed on my Dad's house, by the things I had to do – like those Christmas cards still in their boxes, my Christmas tree isn't up yet, Christmas shopping isn't anywhere near done, there are people to see, baking to do, extra preparation for Christmas worship – stuff was piling up and I was feeling way out of control. And, that made it harder to do anything – know what I mean?

After we hung up I went to turn on my Christmas lights and saw that it was snowing lightly – there's very little I enjoy much more than Christmas lights in the snow and the beauty of that evening began to overcome my angst. Just standing there looking outside began to soothe the grinch in me and I felt myself beginning to relax a little, get some perspective back.

This is the time of year when we look forward, yet again, to the coming of the Light into the world – and don't we yearn for that this year especially – we are looking forward to the birth of Jesus Christ – the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise to us: he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted; and this: I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God.

And Mary's words – her awesome song of faith, of trust, of joy!

This is a good time to be church! We've heard the message that will last! We need to share it!

I need a break! Don't you? A break to focus on the good news Isaiah and Mary tell us, the good news that we are called to believe and to share. Dare to imagine that these words are being fulfilled! Dare to share that good news!

Mary Luti is one of the UCC Still Speaking writers – she's the former Dean of Students at Andover Newton Theological School – and I am blessed to call her friend and mentor. This week one of her writings touched me deeply at a time when I needed a break badly – and I share some of it with you. May her words bless you as they blessed me:

“Advent is a short season. It doesn't require as much spiritual stamina as does its more ferocious sibling, Lent. Nonetheless, if you adopt its characteristic practice of pondering the end of all things, including your own end, even as you await a wonderful birth; if you accept its sobering climate, its invitation to change your mind now and turn

your life around; if you hear its insistence that you watch tirelessly and wait perseveringly for the promised dawn to appear, then right about now, in this third week, you could probably use a little pink. You might really welcome an injection of color into the monochrome wildernesses of this season. And so the color of the third candle is pink, and the color of our scripture readings is too.”

We’re taking a break today.

Mary continues, “Everything is aflush with hope, pink and rosy and bright. And we are meant to feel the mounting excitement of something new just around the corner, something promised, something coming, something good.

“For us who call ourselves Christians, that something good is God-with-us, Jesus, born of Mary. He comes to us in a feeding trough surrounded by peaceable animals. The infirm and outcast come to him. The poor adore him. He is a well of living water in the human desert. He turns that water into wine of endless supply. He multiplies loaves for us in the wilderness, more than we need. He himself is the highway on which we travel back home together rejoicing, after a long sad exile.

“Jesus is for us the graceful well-being promised from of old, the healing that restores nature and human nature in the harmonious wholeness of God’s original intent. And in his presence, as sign and proof that this is the handiwork of the compassionate God, there is singing.

“The pregnant Mary sings as she greets her cousin, Elizabeth. “My soul magnifies the Lord who pulls tyrants from their thrones.

“Gloria in excelsis Deo!” sing the angels to announce his birth. Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to all people on earth!

“And the old man Simeon sings at the sight of the baby in the temple, “My eyes behold your promise, Lord; it is fulfilled! Now I can die in peace!”

“In the presence of the Holy One, everyone sings. Everything makes music. And we do too. Singing is the way we *feel* a promised world that we can only imagine. It’s our way of *knowing* the truth that otherwise we only weakly grasp. When we sing we *experience* the whole, healed life we were meant for. When we sing, we are, at least for the length of the song, exactly who we were created to be. Our song is sign and proof of God’s delight in us, God’s re-creative power at work among us, God’s inexpressible nearness to us.”

Mary continues, “Our singing is a practice and it is a gift. It has many names – grace, vision, life-line, surrender, healing, re-creation. It is also (to borrow a line from Robert Frost) “a momentary stay against confusion.” For when we gather in the pink beauty of Advent, we don’t come alone. Along with us come also the power struggles of spouses, the resentments of children, the toxic waste of landfills, the gunfire of our streets, the injustice of our economic system, the relentless assault of the most venal sort of politics, and the quarrelsome niceties of our theologies. When we gather here in the rosy glow of Isaiah’s vision of a redeemed cosmos, the unredeemed world is always with us. And in these circumstances, and because of all the odds arrayed against Advent’s beauty and promise, we have no choice but to sing. No other strength and power but the unending song of God.

“As people of God’s song we are compelled to believe that sooner or later, our relentless singing will so bewilder the enemies of love that they will have no choice but to give up and turn themselves in. They will bow to the Mystery that is even now eroding

the foundations of hate. Sooner or later, a crack of light will appear under the locked door of life, and the door will fly open. Sooner or later, the song will be on the lips of all creation, and God's hope for the world will come true."

Now, that gives us something to look forward to, does'nt it. This reminds me of the fact that love always wins! Always! Love will overcome hate. Isn't that something we all want to be a part of!

Mary continues, "When we sing we feel the world we can only imagine. Sing, then, on this Sunday of joy, as if by singing high walls will fall, locked chains will snap. Sing as if you believe that at the sound of our songs, one more generous heart will embrace a stranger. Sing as if you believe that by singing, one day the only sound in the whole creation will be a melody of delight – God's delight in us, and ours in God.

"So sing, heavenly bodies in your orbits, stars in your exploding light. Choirs of angels, sing. Sing, Church, a song of healing, a song of resistance, a song of peace. Sing, all the earth—sing for your life! Our God is near!"

"And listen to the Magnificat today: the song of Mary, mother of Jesus! Listen to her words, hear her imagining a world of divine justice and righteousness. Mary Luti says, "I admire her ability to inhabit that world now—to act and speak according to promised new conditions that have yet fully to appear. I admire Mary for her religious and moral *imagination*.

"This wondrous imagination of hers is not the fantasy of a utopian dreamer, an escapist or a Pollyanna. She is, the gospel tells us, "lowly," and the Greek original clarifies the meaning: not "humble" so much as "poor." Dirt poor. Mary does her imagining the way dirt poor people always do—"amid ten thousand losses," or "amid the hard griefs of this world, its bitterness and need."

"Like her singing sisters before her—Hannah, Judith, Deborah, Miriam—she sings a song whose verses leave no room for doubt: this hard world is real and it is miserable—and *it is not all there is to say or see*. Its suffering and injustice are horrific, and they are decidedly not the will of the God of "swirling joys." And so her imagination sings about tyrants dethroned, poor bellies full, mercy extended to the umpteenth generation. But note how she sings of these things with thanks and praise: it is as if God had already done all the rearranging that the world so desperately requires. That's a holy, and a true, imagination.

"It's a fierce and dangerous set of verses, this *Magnificat*. You'd be taking your life in your hands to use Mary's song as the opening prayer of a board meeting of most Fortune 500 companies too (or in a meeting of the president's cabinet.) The gift of a new world and the sway of its just Ruler is not receivable everywhere. It is not even seeable in some places. It takes a lot of imagination. But Mary is undaunted. She is pregnant with imagination. And pregnant with a child. And like most pregnant women, she believes that a new world is being knit together right in her own womb, and that her own child will be the one who makes all the difference.

"You don't have to be a woman, much less a pregnant one, to imagine what Mary imagines. But you can't imagine anything at all—anything true, that is— if you can't see beyond your own privilege to confess that things in the world are not the way God intends.

"You can't imagine the new thing God has in store if you don't regularly feed your soul with the unspeakable misery and ineffable beauty of the world and all its

creatures, putting yourself regularly in the company of real suffering people and real amazing joy.

“You can’t imagine a new way of life if you try to go it alone without the generations of the faithful alongside you, without a community with whom you faithfully practice imagining, a community within which are told and retold a thousand thousand times the stories of God’s dream.”

“And if you cannot imagine, you cannot hope. If you cannot hope, you are left to your fear. And if there is only fear, you know where that leaves you, where it leaves all of us, and where it has always left the world.

“So this Advent, wait and watch, ponder and pray, light candles and do whatever you do; but more than anything else, *dare to imagine*. Imagine a poor woman named Mary, singing, “My soul magnifies the Lord! My soul rejoices in God, our Savior!”

Thank you, Mary Luti, for bringing back the dream of Advent – the dream of hope, peace, joy, and love: and may each of us dare to imagine this dream coming true. And then may each of us do our part in making that happen!

Take a break – savor the season – dream the dream – and sing with Mary. With all that is in us, with all that we are, let us turn to the light, receive the comfort and the challenge, accept the Presence and sing forth our own songs of joy. For the mighty One has done great things for us. Holy is His name. Now and always. Amen.