



Mary

December 20, 2020: The Seventh Sunday of Advent

The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

May your Word only be spoken—and may your word only be heard—In the Name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word.

For a long time, the Last Sunday of Advent has been known as “Mary Sunday.” Each year, the Gospel lesson for the day focusses on some specific aspect of the Incarnation—the manifestation in human form of the very essence and heart of God—either the visit from the Angel Gabriel, or the actual birth. And usually, we hear the Song of Mary, the *Magnificat*, in which Mary declares her trust in the power of God to makes things right.

On this day, all the *big* strokes in the universal picture—of waiting for a new heaven and a new earth, of the coming kingdom of God’s love and justice, of the judgement for the righteous and the unrighteous—all the big cosmic moves Advent sketches out, turn toward a very specific, very human, focus: the decision of a young woman to say yes to God’s invitation to bring God’s life into the world, for hope and healing and justice.

Mary says yes. In the yes that she gives to the angel Gabriel, Mary begins a powerful journey as the bridge between heaven and earth. Mary herself was in a most precarious of “in-between” positions. She came from a town that was not even mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. Yet the Creator of the Universe sent a messenger to her, describing the earth-shattering event that could not take place without her help.

She says yes in life and death circumstances: She was betrothed, a very serious commitment just short of marriage; her yes to God would result in offspring that her betrothed husband Joseph had no part in creating. This was cause in her society to be stoned to death. It seems likely that she was in her early teens at most; yet her responsibility, spiritual maturity, and wisdom was that of someone well beyond her years. Mary says “yes” to God’s invitation to be part of God’s plan of redemption of the world.

In saying yes, Mary offers herself as a home, as a bearer, of God. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, one of Mary’s names is *Theotokos*, the Greek word for “God-bearer.” We are invited to model ourselves after Mary. Our lessons today recall for us the history of God’s desire to dwell with us —either in a temple made by human hands, as in the lesson from Samuel—and amidst a people, as in our Psalm. God holds out that promise to God’s people in these passages.

We cannot be a “God-bearer” in the precise way that Mary was—but we can bear Christ each in our own ways. St. Teresa of Avila is supposed to have said: “Christ has no body now but yours; No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which He looks compassion on this world Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” In our world, in particular with the pandemic surging back, and forces of confusion and division continuing strong, we have opportunities to be “God-bearers” of love and compassion each day.



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Mary's story makes people strong. Many of us have grown up in a tradition of Christianity without much attention to Mary. Or we may have been over exposed to a rather vanilla interpretation of Mary, meek and mild, passive and perfect.

I was humbled to learn something profound the other day about the Song of Mary, the *Magnificat*, that changed the way I see Mary. It's important again to emphasize that back then, when an unwed teenage peasant girl was found to be pregnant, it usually resulted in devastating retribution from the community. Matthew's Gospel account tells us that Joseph, the man Mary was betrothed to marry, planned quietly to call off the wedding. His discretion was his attempt to protect Mary from public humiliation and social ostracism.

Yet, in the words of Rev. Carolyn Sharp, one of my teachers in seminary (written after I was there), "Don't envision Mary as the radiant woman peacefully composing the *Magnificat*." Instead, see her as "a girl who sings defiantly to her God through her tears, fists clenched against an unknown future." When we do this, Professor Sharp goes on to say, "Mary's courageous song of praise becomes a radical resource for those seeking to honor the holy amid the suffering and conflicts of real life."

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I had no idea that there have been times and places when oppressive governments have banned the public recitation of the *Magnificat* – so subversive is the song's message.

For example, during the British rule of India, the *Magnificat* was prohibited from being sung in church.

During the so-called "Dirty War" in Argentina in the late 1970s and early 1980s, after the mothers of disappeared children covered the plaza in the capital city of Buenos Aires with the words of the *Magnificat*, the military junta controlling the country outlawed all public displays of the song. Too threatening to the power of the corrupt and brutal military government was Mary's declaration of hope.

In the 1980s, in the midst of that country's long civil war, Guatemala's government determined that Mary's words about God's preferential love for the poor were too dangerous and revolutionary to be publicly recited. The song created a stir amongst Guatemala's impoverished masses. Mary's words inspired the poor of Guatemala to believe that change was indeed possible.

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So today, we give thanks for Mary—whose example gives strength and power to the weak over the mighty; who inspires us to be bearers of God to the people and circumstances in our lives in need of love and justice; and who leads us to say yes to purposes of God.

Amen.