

December 19, 2021  
Fourth Advent

Luke 1:46-55

### “It’s Magnificent”

Mary was in a tight spot – but she had gone off grid to spend some time with a relative who was also in “the family way.” The difference, of course, was that everyone who heard Elizabeth was going to have a baby thought to themselves, **“Wow, God is at work there.”** And everyone who heard Mary was going to have a baby thought, “Wow, I can’t believe she was **unfaithful to Joseph, the little tramp.**” Elizabeth tries to set them straight, of course. But in the end, *it is Mary who expresses confidence in God in a difficult moment.*

We call her song, *“The Magnificat”* after one of her first words in the Latin translation. I know Luke uses the word “said” – but friends this is a Broadway musical where the protagonist has been through the wringer and sings confidently about what will be. I also imagine Mary dancing with joy in a way which would have been at home in “Singing in the Rain.”

If Broadway is too much of a stretch to you – how about a Celtic folk song? The tune for our focus hymn today is exactly that. Compared to *Magnificat* or even *magnify* it feels much easier to understand, *“My soul cries out with a joyful shout that the God of my heart is great – and my spirit sings of the wonderful things that you bring to the ones who wait.”*

In the first three Sundays of Advent, I chose texts which were a match for the song we were focusing on. Today, the person who wrote the song chose the Biblical text. The goal of the song is to help us delve into the heart of Mary’s song in Luke.

I first sang this hymn after the new Presbyterian Hymnal came out – and loved it. Then one day I was listening to Pandora and a song singing of a young woman who was, *“the star of the county down”* came on. And I thought – wait a minute! I know that tune! So, when you hear this hymn, *recognize that the tune is sung by people in pubs, at fairs and in public gatherings on the other side of the pond.* It reminds one of Martin Luther who wrote songs for church using tunes he learned in drinking establishments. When he was criticized for it, he responded, “Why should the devil have all the good music?” This is not to equate Celtic folk songs

with wickedness – but to say there is a long-honored tradition of writing songs of the faith to *tunes people already know*.

I think the tune is delightful. But the strength of this hymn is truly the text. It embodies Mary's trust in God when there wasn't any hope in her life aside from the promises of God.

*"You fixed your sight on your servant's plight, and my weakness you did not spurn."* What a marvelous expression of faith – for Mary and for us. No one gets out of this life without experiencing loss and sorrow – some sort of "plight." Someone I admired used to say, **"It's the only flavor life comes in."** And the hope we find in Mary's song is that **God is not content to leave it there.**

*"My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn."*

This refrain of the "Canticle of the Turning" expresses Mary's song beautifully. **Life is not as it should be** – but **God is bringing a new day**, a better day – where Justice flourishes, tears are unnecessary and there is a new lease on life for everyone.

I feel the need to dig a bit more into the part of Mary's song where we are told that *God's mercy is upon those who fear him*. This plays into all our worst fears about God – that *God is a major fault finder who only wants to catch us doing poorly so we can be fairly punished*. You know better than this...you do. But it is the *caricature of our faith* which has a healthy presence in the culture. And when we read things like, *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"* we can imagine God likes it when we are shaking in our boots.

This is neither helpful nor accurate. Better words for the match between our disposition and God's mercy would be **honor, respect, and reverence**. When we *honor* God, we open ourselves to receive mercy. When we *respect* God, we know we are not God ourselves. And when we live with *reverence* for God it impacts our ethical choices and our capacity for compassion. Knowing God and not our current social order defines what is good and right enables us to live without regard to social class, wealth, or power. Mercy becomes a currency of our lives as it flows from God to us to each other.

Mary is both the one who sings – and she is exhibit A in the assertion that God turns the world around...raising up those in need and bringing down those who don't imagine they have any need.

We are at fourth Advent. Today, perhaps more than any other, we can sing anticipate and hope that the world is about to turn. Turn away from the broken relationships which define it toward the renewal God brings in his son. We don't know everything God is up to – but we can say with confidence that whatever it is – When God's will is done – it is magnificent.