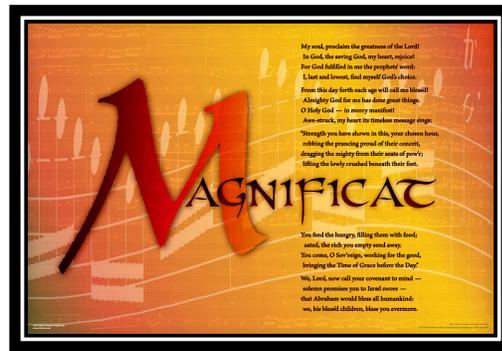
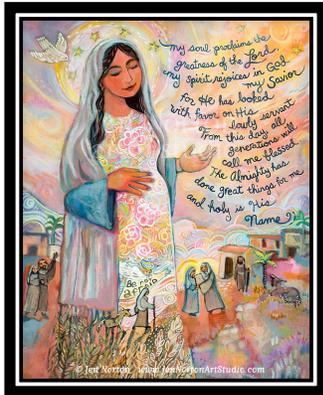


SERMON SERIES:

Advent 2016
"There's Something About Mary"

AN ADVENT LITURGY: MARY, THE MAGNIFICAT,
AND PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY

LITURGY FOR THE LIGHTING OF THE ADVENT CANDLES - BY JOHN GAMMIE



COLLEGE HILL
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

712 S. Columbia Ave., Tulsa, OK 74104
918-592-5800 • email: collegehill@sbcglobal.net
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SERMON SERIES:

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“There’s Something About Mary”
Reclaiming Mary from Church Tradition & Storybook Image

PLUS:

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LITURGY FOR THE LIGHTING OF THE ADVENT CANDLES

– BY JOHN GAMMIE, 2016

REV. TODD FREEMAN, DECEMBER 2016

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Advent

**An Advent Liturgy:
Mary, the Magnificat, and Progressive Christianity**

A Liturgy for the Lighting of the Advent Candles by John Gammie, 2016



INTRODUCTION

As Advent begins, for some of us, memories and storybook pictures of the season return, comforting and reassuring. And in uncertain times, no doubt this is good thing. But also in times like these we should consider whether it also may be good to revisit our shared stories with new eyes, open to the possibility within them there "might yet be more light" - more wisdom, even if challenging and unsettling wisdom, in our familiar, comfortable stories.

This year, throughout the season of Advent, we will be looking to the figure of Mary. And immediately we may recall the manger scene: mother, child, Joseph, shepherds, under the stars, a scene of hope, and peace, and joy, and love. But we get ahead of ourselves. Advent is a journey - with the promise of informing our own journey. We need to pause and reflect and listen, with Mary.

First Sunday: Hope (Mary)

Today is the First Sunday of Advent. And as we light the first candle, the **Candle of Hope**, we remember Mary. At the beginning the Gospel of Luke we first encounter Mary almost as a sketch, in broad outline: A Judean woman in first century Nazareth, almost certainly uneducated, pregnant, unwed and living in Roman-occupied territory. And, it seems fair to ask, "How can this be the face of hope?" Yet Luke affirms she is: The face of radical new beginnings, in a place and person most improbable. Against all expectations the world is about to change with Mary at the center. A startling turn. But we do this message a deep disservice to keep it contained, to say "just that once" or, more pointedly, "just in that story for the children."

The radical challenge of the Advent story we find in Luke is that sacred change is often found, not in the powerful or rulers of the day, but rather in places sometimes considered the lowliest, in people considered of no consequence. This is indeed hope: Sacred change is here and now, all around in the (seemingly) mundane inconsequential everyday world, if we only open our eyes. And as we remember Mary, we do well to ask what would our world look like, what Advent might we see (what Advent might we create), if we were to recognize the work of the Sacred in each other and ourselves, if we were to see the face of hope in each Mary we meet, quiet, humble, unassuming, across the world, and even here in Tulsa? May we have the strength and courage and wisdom to so believe, and see, and act. Amen.

There's Something About Mary

Part 1: Reclaiming Mary From Church Doctrine

Luke 1:5-7, 11-13, 24-49
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
November 27, 2016

If you grew up Presbyterian, or basically in any Protestant denomination, you may not be aware that there is an official field of church study called Mariology. Mariology is the theological study of Mary, the mother of Jesus. It is primarily active among Roman Catholics. **We Protestants, for the most part, don't spend much time thinking about Mary.** So when the Worship & Music ministry team recently brainstormed ideas on what our congregation might focus on during this season of Advent, I knew I had a lot to learn when we settled on giving Mary her due. In fact, I have never had to read and study so much for a sermon series, especially from Roman Catholic sources.

One of the goals set by the ministry team for this Advent is to **lift Mary out of her common storybook setting.** For much of what many of us know about her is limited to cute Christmas pageants and those flannel felt-board cutouts from children church school classes decades ago. **What any of us know and believe about Mary, therefore, is deeply influenced by our own particular faith background.**

Today's focus will be on understanding the Mary of early church tradition. In the next few weeks we will take a closer look at what the Bible actually reveals about Mary, and then how she is viewed in progressive and feminist understandings. Three weeks from today, we reach the highlight with our Chancel Choir's performance during worship of John Rutter's *The Magnificat*. If you don't know what the Magnificat is, then this sermon series is especially geared for you.

But first, we must start way back in time with the developing tradition within early Christianity. Since both the gospels of Luke and Matthew mention that Mary was a virgin, one of the earliest debates was whether or not Mary remained a virgin not only before, during and after the birth of Jesus, but also for the rest of her life. This is referred to as the **perpetual virginity of Mary.** More on that in a moment.

In the 2nd century, early church father Irenaeus called Mary the **"second Eve"** because her willful obedience to God undid the harm that was done through Eve's disobedient choice to eat the forbidden fruit. By the 4th century, early versions of the **"Hail Mary"** prayer were common, based on Luke's account of the Angel Gabriel's annunciation to Mary.

The Council of Ephesus in 431 CE officially declared Mary to be the **"Mother of God."** They coined the Greek term *Theotokos*, which literally means "God-bearer." It was agreed that Jesus took divinity from God the Father and humanity from his mother. But the title "Mother of God" was really more about affirming their understanding of the nature of Jesus – his undivided personhood and nature expressed in both his divinity and his humanity.

There was a big growth and development of Mariology during the Middle Ages, beginning after the Great Schism in 1054 split Christianity into the Orthodox Church in the east, and the Roman Catholic Church in the west. Today, we'll be following the Roman Catholic tradition.

Though not declared an official **church dogma (which means an infallible Church teaching)** until several centuries later, there was a widespread belief in the **Assumption of Mary**. (And that's not about making assumptions about who Mary was.) This teaching declared that Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was taken up, assumed, body and soul directly into heavenly glory. Pope Pius XII declared it official church dogma in 1950. But he deliberately left open the question of whether Mary actually died before her Assumption into heaven.

Another belief about Mary that circulated since medieval times, but again not declared an official church dogma until 1854 by Pope Pius IX, came to be known as the **Immaculate Conception**. Most of us Protestants have heard of that one, but we tend to confuse it with the virgin birth of Jesus. No, this teaching isn't about Jesus' conception, but rather Mary's conception by her mother. Basically, it states that Mary was conceived without original sin. Here's the actual language from Pope Pius IX in 1854:

We declare, pronounce and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind, was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God, and therefore should firmly and constantly be believed by all the faithful. —□Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, December 8, 1854

It's important to note here that this definition regards Mary being preserved from the contagion or stain of original sin only, saying nothing about personal sin and living a sinless life. From what I could deduce from my reading, however, though not official dogma the Roman Catholic Church basically believes Mary did remain sinless. This was not of her own doing, however, but because of the 'merits of Christ.' This allowed her the unique status as a gift from God to allow her to become the stainless Mother of God. Does that mean, however, that Mary didn't need a savior? According to church teaching, yes she did, since God's grace was still required for her to remain sinless.

Getting confused yet? But wait, there's more!

Jumping back to the belief in a perpetual and **Ever-Virgin Mary**, there first had to be an explanation of the difference between virginity during child birth and virginity of conception. Don't worry, I'm not clear on this one either. But this dogma meant that Mary had no other children except Jesus, and therefore the scriptural inferences that suggest that Jesus had brothers and sisters are explained away. It was thought that with her body serving as a vessel and temple for the divine Christ child, it was important that the temple of her body remain pure.

Another doctrine of the Catholic Church, though not an official dogma, elevated her to the title of **Queen of Heaven**. Other names include Queen of Heaven and Earth, Queen of the World, and even Queen and Ruler of the Universe.

This is the particular depiction of Mary that I've chosen and printed in color on the cover of this morning's worship bulletin. You'll notice that she is wearing a royal crown, and her head is surrounded by 12 stars. She's clearly standing above the earth with the banner reading *Regina Pacis*, the Latin for Queen of Peace. When you look at

paintings of Mary, which flourished during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, she is most commonly wearing a blue colored dress or cloak. Blue was the color of royalty, especially of an empress, and sometimes divinity. Red is the next most common color.

Now, this Queen of Heaven doctrine uses as its foundation a couple of verses in the Book of Revelation, Chapter 12.

12 ¹A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. ²She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. (NIV)

From all this, Mary the Mother of God (as in giving birth to Jesus the Savior and Redeemer) is thought to actually participate in God's plan of salvation. This has caused much confusion, however, when some Catholics use the title of Mary as a **Co-Redemptrix**. This doctrine does not mean that Mary has been elevated in a way that she participates as an equal in the redemption of the human race. Catholics strongly maintain that Christ is the only redeemer. After all, Mary herself needed redemption and was redeemed by the grace of her own son. Co-redemptrix refers, then, to an indirect or unequal but important participation by Mary in the redemption process. After all, without her consent, the incarnation of God in Jesus wouldn't have happened in the first place.

This leads to another Roman Catholic doctrine about Mary that is often misunderstood. That's the title of Mary as a **Mediatrix**. Even though Catholics teach that Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and humans, they have also taught since early times that Mary plays an **intercessory role** for all believers, especially those who request her intercession through prayer. Mary, of all the Catholic saints, is seen as having the greatest intercessory power. She is seen as a principal dispenser, therefore, of God's graces, even to the point of being an Advocate for the people of God.

Protestants, however, teach that we all have a direct line to God. But historically, when people focused on a male God that was angry and punishing (and to a lesser extent, Jesus as well) they discerned that what was needed is a buffer zone, a mediator with a feminine touch of compassion and understanding. Mary was the perfect person for the job. It was also thought to help convert those who came from indigenous religions that had a feminine image of the Divine.

All of these dogmas and doctrines, of course, have led to a high level of devotion of Mary. Yet Protestants have also misunderstood this throughout the ages, to the point of almost completely diminishing altogether the role of Mary in the story of faith. According to Catholics, **devotion, adoration, and bestowing honor to the Virgin Mary does not amount to worship, as many of us have been taught**. She is not an object of worship. That is reserved for God. Mary is viewed as subordinate to Christ, but uniquely so, in that she is seen as above all other creatures. **Pope John Paul II**, not long ago, stated, **"Among all devotions, that which most consecrates and conforms a soul to our Lord is devotion to Mary."** In other words, **devotion to Mary helps lead Catholics to God, Christ, and the Church.**

Therefore, I feel bit of a warning may be in order at this point. As an inclusive community of faith, one that respects and affirms diversity, **we must be careful not to disparage, let alone trash the beliefs of others that differ from our own**. Most Roman Catholics hold these teaching about Mary (as shocking as they may seem to us) dear to their hearts. **They play an important role in their spiritual growth and journey of faith.**

You can only imagine, however, what happened during the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago, and even more so during the Enlightenment. To that we can add what has been reclaimed by progressive and feminist theology about the role of Mary in our own life of faith.

But that's the next two Sundays. I know this has been a lot of information, and if you're like me, I bet your brain hurts.

Amen.

[A list of resources will appear at the end of this sermon series.]



An Advent Liturgy:

Mary, the Magnificat, and Progressive Christianity

A Liturgy for the Lighting of the Advent Candles by John Gammie, 2016

Second Sunday: Peace (The Annunciation)

Today is the Second Sunday of Advent. And as we light the second candle, the **Candle of Peace**, we again remember Mary in the Gospel of Luke receiving words of strange, wonderful and ominous portent, as if in a dream or vision. An angel speaking. In the glare of modernity some of us may struggle to give this scene meaning or relevance. Still if we can, as the saying goes, take the scripture seriously, even if not literally, here is a striking message and example for us here and now. Luke paints a portrait of Mary in the face of an incredible pronouncement, initially and understandably troubled. But she listens and discerns. And amid uncertainty and doubt she commits boldly in hope and faith to the promise of a new creation with her.

Here is the message of Mary this second Sunday of Advent: Today, in the face of great uncertainty and change, listen for and discern what might be the sacred promise of our life together. Believe in its hope. Commit to the promise. Claim its peace. Act. And perhaps change the world. Amen.

There's Something About Mary

Part 2: Church Tradition & Spirituality

Luke 1:39-56
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
November 27, 2016

"I know this has been a lot of information, and if you're like me, I bet your brain hurts." That was the closing sentence of my sermon last Sunday, Part 1 in this sermon series on Mary, the mother of Jesus. So I want to congratulate and thank you for being such a patient congregation as you respectfully sat through that sermon. In the words used by a former pastor here in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, who once told the Presbytery itself their meetings as "mind numbing and soul sucking," I know that's how it felt for some of you as I trod through 1500 years of early Christianity and later Roman Catholic understandings of Mary, the field of theological study known as Mariology.

Their understanding of the role of Mary in the story of faith, which developed over centuries, includes the dogma and doctrines I mentioned last week, such as:

- The perpetual Virginity of Mary
- Mary as the "second Eve"
- The Mother of God
- The Assumption of Mary
- The Immaculate Conception
- The Queen of Heaven
- The Co-Redemptrix
- The Mediatrix

In order to have a better understanding of the role of Mary in our own Protestant and Reformed traditions, it was necessary to take even a quick look at what others have understood, and currently understand about her. It was also important last week to explore **how often we Protestants misunderstand the actual Roman Catholic teachings and practices concerning Mary.**

So how did the early reformers of the Protestant Reformation in northern Europe 500 years ago react and respond to all this? As you know, there was an unprecedented attack on the Roman Catholic Church, including seeing much of its Mariology as sacrilegious and superstitious. But here's the biggest surprise of them all. **Both Martin Luther and our own John Calvin continued to adhere to the beliefs of the perpetual virginity of Mary, and her title as "Mother of God." Their primary concern and issue was seeing the veneration of Mary – the honor, respect, adoration and devotion to her – as competition to the divine role of Jesus Christ.** The reformers interpreted Roman Catholic devotion to Mary as worship of Mary, which Catholics deny. And they judged any physical image of Mary as idolatry and breaking the Ten Commandments concerning not making graven images. That's why the initial Protestant movement tragically

included the destruction of a vast amount of magnificent religious art – including stained glass windows, and statues and paintings of Mary in churches in northern Europe and England.

The Protestant emphasis on *sola scriptura*, scripture alone, led to the tossing out of a great deal of church tradition that grew within Catholicism over the centuries. And much of that is understandable from a Protestant perspective. For instance, many of us continue to wonder **how you can take the Mary of scripture, a poor, vulnerable, peasant teenage girl living in Roman-occupied Nazareth, and turn her into the embodiment of feminine obedience and purity, and elevate her to the position of the Queen of Heaven, even the Mother of God.** A good portion of Christianity today, even among many Roman Catholics, now see the particular understanding of Mary as a perpetual virgin *and* the perfect mother, as representing an impossible and unrealistic ideal for women. But in the perpetual knee-jerk reaction of throwing the mother out with the bath water, there is much that can and should be reclaimed, especially by those of us with progressive and feminist theological perspectives.

Let's stay with John Calvin for just a moment longer, however. The specific doctrine Calvin spoke out against most was the Roman Catholic Church's praise of Mary as the Queen of Heaven, considering it blasphemous. Calvin wrote, "I cannot consider such language as good, proper, or suitable... [It] can only serve to harden the ignorant in their superstitions."

In an effort of achieving greater and more inclusive understanding, however, it needs to be stated that Catholics *do* indeed differ from most traditional, especially evangelical Protestant teachings that accept the Scripture as the *only* source of God's revelation. Catholics have a strong belief in the truth of Scripture, but they also believe in church tradition as a way in which God continues to reveal truth to us. Tradition in Roman Catholicism can include beliefs, customs, prayers, and worship, the teaching of popes, bishops, theologians and Church councils. It is their process of continually reflecting on the way in which the Word of God encounters their own experience as a community of faith.

When stated like that, it seems obvious that Protestantism itself has evolved since its earliest anti-church tradition days to a somewhat similar position. Do we not also believe the Sacred Presence of God can be revealed in and through all of creation, not just in and through the Bible? And in addition, revealed in the way we reflect upon how the scriptures encounter our own experience here and now as a community of faith? And yet it's true, our differing theologies have led us into differing beliefs and practices.

Moving, now, into the important realm of spirituality – the ways in which we connect with God, and God connects with us – there are some good examples of those differences concerning Mary. Here, for example, is a prayer from the Roman Catholic tradition reflecting much of their particular perspective of Mary.

*Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, Our life, our sweetness and our hope.
To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve,
To thee do we send up our sighs, Mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.
Turn then, most gracious Advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us,
And after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary! Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God,
That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ. Amen.*

This prayer confirms the role of Mary in Catholicism acting as an intercessor between humans and God. Protestants believe, however, we don't need an intercessor – like Mary or any other saint – in order to emphasize, add to, or even to lift our prayers before God's Presence. So instead, we might pray a similar prayer something like this:

God of love and grace,
 we pray for your mercy as we struggle in the circumstances of our lives.
 Turn toward us in our need,
 and lead us to live life according to the ways and teachings of Jesus,
 worthy of being his faithful disciples.
 Thank you for hearing our prayer.
 Amen

From a spiritual perspective, I see these two different prayers, which admittedly use quite different language, as very similar in purpose. Yes, as Protestants we have taken Mary, the mother of Jesus, basically out of the equation when it comes to our devotional life. And again, by devotion I mean that which draws us closer to experiencing the Sacred Presence of God in our midst. Many of us here do that in and through nature or music, for example. Do we consider that idolatry? No. In a like manner, a majority of Roman Catholics similarly experience their devotion to Mary as drawing them closer to God. **So who are we to judge?**

More and more Protestants are beginning to wonder if we **are missing something that might be gained from focusing a bit more on an understanding of Mary?** Mary's story, says Beverly Gaventa, a New Testament scholar at Princeton University and the coeditor of the book *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, "is a wonderful example of divine grace that Protestants have neglected. It was seen as Catholic territory, but now the lines between denominations are dropping."

Not everyone feels the same way, however. The Mary revival especially troubles some evangelical Christians, who claim that Mary devotion continues to detract from a more proper focus on Christ alone. R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, declares, "Those who argue that Mary offers us a more compassionate understanding of God than is revealed in Jesus Christ alone insult both the person and work of Christ and accept the worst excesses of Catholic piety." I'm wondering, however, is Jesus himself – or God, for that matter – really insulted? Or, is it simply a matter of those who believe differently from Catholicism, and believe they alone are right, who are the ones who are insulted?

Has not Protestantism become, in many regards, about as tradition-based as Roman Catholicism had become before the Protestant Reformation? That's why many progressives believe we have already entered into the early stages of a new reformation, one as potentially disrupting to traditional and orthodox theology and practices as the one 500 years ago.

Yet, we still have more work to do in understanding Mary in a way that speaks to where many of us find ourselves today. Instead of ignoring her, or seeing her in a way that relegates her (and by extension to women in general) to a role of submissive obedience, or lifting her up as an impossibly unrealistic ideal to emulate, **we can move to an understanding of Mary as a model of calling us to cry out for social justice.** That is

what we find in the Gospel of Luke when he puts on the lips of Mary her response to her relative Elizabeth's calling her "blessed among women". It's known as the Song of Mary, or using the Latin, the Magnificat.

That will be the focus of next week's sermon, Part 3, and it will be especially highlighted the week after that as we experience the Chancel Choir's performance of John Rutter's *Magnificat*.

Hopefully, this week's sermon hasn't been quite as "mind numbing and soul sucking" as last week.

Amen.



An Advent Liturgy:

Mary, the Magnificat, and Progressive Christianity

A Liturgy for the Lighting of the Advent Candles by John Gammie, 2016



Third Sunday: Joy (The Magnificat)

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent. And as we light the third candle, the **Candle of Joy**, we remember Mary and her song of joy in the Gospel of Luke - "The Magnificat." It is striking that this song, with intentional echoes of Hanna's song from First Samuel, comes in response to an affirmation not from an angel or supernatural vision, but from Mary's own cousin, Elizabeth, herself an important actor in the Gospel drama.

Consider: Our own songs of joy, our creative expressions of deep gratitude, often come in fellowship, in life together, when we recognize and affirm the divine in one another. We gather here today in this place to do just that, bringing our own concerns and troubles, we claim deeper hope and deeper peace. Let us pause, reflect, and affirm the divine among us and within each of us -- and sing our songs of joy together. Amen.

There's Something About Mary

Part 3: Singing Mary's Song

Luke 1:39-56
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
November 27, 2016

Welcome to Part 3 of this sermon series on Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the theological field of study known as Mariology. In preparing for the season of Advent this year the hope of our Worship & Music ministry team has been to **reclaim Mary – from both what we consider the excesses of the Roman Catholic tradition, and the lack of attention or storybook image in our Protestant tradition.** That's what we've explored the past two Sundays. Today, we move beyond tradition to examine an understanding of Mary from progressive and feminist perspectives.

It's important to try to envision Mary as an actual person living in her own context, knowing that we learn very little about her from the scriptures themselves. And what is written about her is understood by progressives more as metaphorical language steeped in the theology of the gospel writers than it is of a record of actual literal history. Dr. Helen K Bond, New Testament lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, writes:

What can speak to us best is her humanity. Mary shares women's experiences: her early arranged marriage, her struggle to keep the family together after the death of her husband, her love for her son, and her grief at his death. It is the human Mary who reaches across the centuries to women in every age and every culture.

One of my hopes, therefore, for this extensive emphasis on Mary during Advent is that we will come to approach Mary as a biblical figure that *can* play a role in our own spiritual development – specifically calling us to God's work of social justice, hospitality, and compassion.

Two very important resources to which I turn to often use are *The Women's Bible Commentary*, and the *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*. In the latter, there is an article on Mariology written by South Korean feminist, and pastor in Seoul, **Han Kuk Yom**. In support of some of the tradition, she believes doctrines of Mary, and the spirituality attached to her adoration, provide some of the missing female imagery for God that was lost in the male, monotheistic traditions. She writes, "**When the Protestant Reformers rejected worship related to Mary as unbiblical, they provided an important critique but also eliminated this source of female imagery in worship.**" In fact, it is believed that the Roman Catholic Church intentionally allowed veneration of Mary to go as far as it did because it actually served as an evangelistic tool to draw people to Christianity from indigenous pagan religions, most of which included female deities. In other words, devotion to Mary made her a figure that functions in many ways like a goddess,

Christianity's adaptation of the feminine dimension of the divine. Reclaiming that missing dimension is crucial for us today in order to gain a fuller understanding of the nature and character of God.

Yom continues, "Since the late 1970s, there has been a great transformation of Mariology through the work of feminist theologians. They have criticized traditional Mariology as an ideology of sexism. The concept of perpetual virginity is seen as misogyny and disdain for women's sexuality. Mary's words of assent to the angel Gabriel in Luke 1:39, 'Let it be with me according to your word,' and her image as the new Eve have been criticized as tools for the patriarchal order of the church. The dualism represented by Mary, the obedient sinless virgin, in contrast with Eve, the disobedient sinner, is rejected by women who understand this to be a false stereotype of women as either saint or sinner.

"At the same time, some feminist theologians have sought out the positive aspects of Mariology and worked to transform the traditional doctrines." That is a common goal in progressive theological thought – to reclaim instead of throwing out. "For instance, Mary's virginity is seen as a symbol of autonomy, as she is not dependent on any man and could carry out God's liberating action directly through her own life." It's like the new Disney princesses who don't need a prince to rescue them from anything! "Mary's obedience and servanthood is reinterpreted to emphasize her active response of faith to God's call...She no longer is understood as a model of oppression of women but as a model of their liberation."

This new understanding of Mariology has emerged, in part, from **the third world**. They particularly emphasize the **Magnificat** from **Luke 1:46-55** as the main text for feminist Mariology. This passage is part of this morning's Gospel reading, also known as the **Song of Mary**, which we will look at in more detail in just a moment. "Mary is seen as the representative of the oppressed people. She represents God's preferential option for the poor. Her prophetic words are understood as the basis of a **spirituality of revolution, a call for liberation of women and of all victims of poverty and injustice.**" Fearing the oppressed and impoverished masses, last century at least three different countries banned the public reading of Mary's Song, the Magnificat, even in church, because those governments considered the song's message to be dangerously subversive and a threat to their power. Those countries included India during the time of British rule, Guatemala in the 1980s, and later in Argentina. This message was recognized by others, as well. Before being executed by the Nazis, German theologian **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** stated during an Advent sermon in 1933:

The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings...This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.

What many of us have missed is Mary's example as a real person of faith, called by God, struggling with the daily demands of her life. In fact, Luke portrays Mary as nothing less than a prophet, an initial participant in a new and radical movement that would be led by her son. Unlike the quiet and passive image we often have of her, Mary is actually an outspoken voice for justice. Here's the biblical context. When Mary

went to visit her relative Elizabeth (who was pregnant herself with who would become John the Baptist), Mary is greeted with, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Luke 1:42). Responding to Elizabeth's blessing, Luke puts on the lips of Mary a song that most biblical scholars believe was a later liturgical song used in early Jewish-Christian liturgical worship. These scholars also see this song as inspired by a scattering of Old Testament passages, especially modeled after the song of Hannah in the book of 1 Samuel.

The song in Luke is known by the title, **The Magnificat**. That's because that is the first word in the song in Latin, meaning 'to magnify.' In English, the first line is, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant" (Luke. 1:46-48). The song goes on to praise God for the great things God has done for Mary, and for God's mercy from generation to generation, going all the way back to the covenant with Abraham and Sarah. But then we encounter that very different picture of Mary from what many of us are familiar. **In a decidedly prophetic, and yes political call to justice, Mary recognizes God as the One who shakes up the status quo.** Luke uses Mary's song to foreshadow her son's prophetic ministry that will do the very same thing.

Mary's Song becomes, in essence, an overture for the theme of the whole of Luke's gospel. When Mary sings about being lowly, she is not just referring to humility, but also about actual poverty and the precarious position in which she finds herself. We must not forget that Mary is very young, poor, pregnant, unmarried, living under the oppression of the Roman Empire. Given these circumstances, the culture in which she lived would have looked upon her with shame, and as someone to be despised and rejected, if not stoned to death for adultery. But that's not how God saw her! And that's the twist. James Kay, a preaching professor at Princeton Theological Seminary (a Presbyterian seminary) wrote an article for the *Christian Century* magazine back in 1997 that beautifully frames Mary's Song in all its prophetic glory. He writes:

Mary sings...a freedom song on behalf of all the faithful poor in the land. She sings a song of freedom for all who, in their poverty and their wretchedness, still believe that God will make a way where there is no way. Like John the Baptist, **Mary prophesies deliverance, she prophesies about a way that is coming in the wilderness of injustice.**

Mary reveals a God who 'has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts'; who 'has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly'; who 'has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.' **What we learn is that contrary to conventional wisdom in any culture God is not partial to the rich, the powerful, or the proud.**

But are we seeing this being played out in real life?? I wonder what all this says about our recent political process? What about the reversal of fortunes where the lowly will be lifted up, the proud scattered, the rich sent away empty, and the powerful brought down from their thrones? What about upending the status quo? Do only powerful millionaires and billionaires get to govern our country? Where is the promise being fulfilled in Mary's Song? Well, like the major theme of the season of Advent itself, it shows that we are indeed still caught in an in-between time, a time between the 'now' and the 'not yet.'

With Mary's Song, however, our is a call to hope. It's also a call to action. So the question that I pose to you, and us, this morning is this: **Should Mary's song not be our song as well?** I guess it depends on which choir you sing with. But for myself and College Hill I think the choir we want to sing in is the one that does sing this prophetic song of justice – our as Chancel Choir will perform next Sunday during worship: John Rutter's *Magnificat*. It is a song of hope of what God – through us – will do for the poor, the powerless, and the marginalized of the world; a song that we sing on behalf of all those who mourn, or are lonely, or do not have enough food, or do not have a roof over their head, or live in places of strife and war, or who struggle with mental illness or a physical illness and those who care for them, and so many more.

Let Mary's humanity and her song of joy and hope, which serves as a call for social transformation, be our incentive to reclaim the relevance of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in guiding and providing courage and motivation to our own spiritual life – as individuals and as a congregation.

When we are in need of direction and hope, Luke points us to Mary. He presents her not as a goddess, nor a statue of alabaster in a musty cathedral, nor a plastic or ceramic figurine molded with a sweet and innocent posture to stand lifeless on a coffee table or Communion Table manger scene. Mary can serve as a genuine example of faith acted out in discipleship and response to God's call to serve.

And finally, **as Mary gave birth to the Christ Child within her, let us also continuously give birth to Christ's Sacred Presence within us, and in doing so recognize the Divine in one another.**

Amen.

Selected Resources:

The Women's Bible Commentary
Dictionary of Feminist Theologies
Luke, Westminster Bible Companion, Sharon Ringe
New Interpreter's Bible Commentary
Mariology of the Catholic Church, Wikipedia
History of Catholic Mariology, Wikipedia
The Invisible, Protestant Mary, Daniel Hazard
The Protestant Reformers on Mary, servantofchrist.tripod.com
Mary's Song – and Ours, James F. Kay
Mary, the Reluctant Prophet, Alyce M. McKenzie
Who Was the Real Virgin Mary?, Helen Bond
Mary as a Role Model, Byron L. Rohrig
A New Perspective on Mary, Mark Hanson
A Modern Magnificat, Rev. Dr. Karin Case
The Subversive Magnificat: What Mary Expected the Messiah to Be Like, Jason Porterfield
Magnificat! Learning to Sing Mary's Song (A Progressive Christian Lectionary Commentary), Carl Gregg at patheos.com



An Advent Liturgy:

Mary, the Magnificat, and Progressive Christianity

A Liturgy for the Lighting of the Advent Candles by John Gammie, 2016



Fourth Sunday: Love (The Manger)

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Advent. And as we light the fourth candle, the **Candle of Love**, we again remember Mary, singing her song of joy and praise. Mary's story of course does not end there. And, if we can set aside for a time our storybook pictures of the familiar scenes, we may recapture how jarringly hard the Gospel stories show Mary's journey to be: Dislocation from an emperor's edict, a birth in the most humble of places, a prophecy her soul would be pierced, and (in John) her as witness to the death of her own child.

In the Gospels we only see Mary in outline. But the image we see is clear. Mary's belief in and love for her son is steadfast in the face of great uncertainty and challenge. The love of a parent for a child: It is the image Jesus invokes in prayer...we as beloved children of the Universe.

The promise of Advent and the Gospels is not for freedom from hardship. It is the promise of sacred change out of hardship and brokenness, in places we may least expect, and, if we can accept it, with us as beloved and loving actors in the drama. This season let us reclaim the manger scene as an emblem of this fiercely relevant promise: Under the stars, Mary with her child, Joseph, and the shepherds, actors in a story they (and we) do not fully understand, but we affirm and claim with Hope, and Peace, and Joy, and Love, the promise of sacred new beginnings for us and with us today, here and now. Amen.



Magnificat

BY JOHN RUTTER (B. 1945)

Dr. Kim Childs, Director of Music ◆ Mike Gibson, Organist
Chancel Choir ◆ Hannah Kangas, Soprano

I. MAGNIFICAT

My soul doth magnify the Lord: and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the lowliness of his hand-maiden: for behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

II. OF A ROSE, A LOVELY ROSE (15th Century English Poem)

Hearken to me, both old and young, how this Rose began to spring; a fairer rose to mine liking in all this world ne know I none.

Five branches of that rose there been, the which be both fair and sheen; the rose is called Mary, heaven's queen. Out of her bosom a blossom sprang.

The first branch was of great honour: that blest Marie should bear the flow'r; there came an angel from heaven's tower to break the devil's bond.

The second branch was great of might, that sprang upon Christmas night; the star shone over Bethlem bright, that man should see it both day and night.

The third branch did spring and spread; three kinges then the branch gan led unto our Lady in her child-bed; into Bethlem that branch sprang right.

The fourth branch it sprang to hell, the devil's power for to fell: that no soul therein should dwell, the branch so blessedfully sprang.

The fifth branch it was so sweet, it sprang to heav'n, both crop and root, therein to dwell and be our bote (salvation): so blessedly it sprang.

Pray we to her with great honour, she that bare the blessed flow'r, to be our help and our succour, and shield us from the fiendes bond.

III. QUIA FECIT MIHI MAGNA

For he that is mighty hath magnified me: and holy is his Name. Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are filled with thy Gloria. Hosanna in the highest.

IV. ET MISERICORDIA

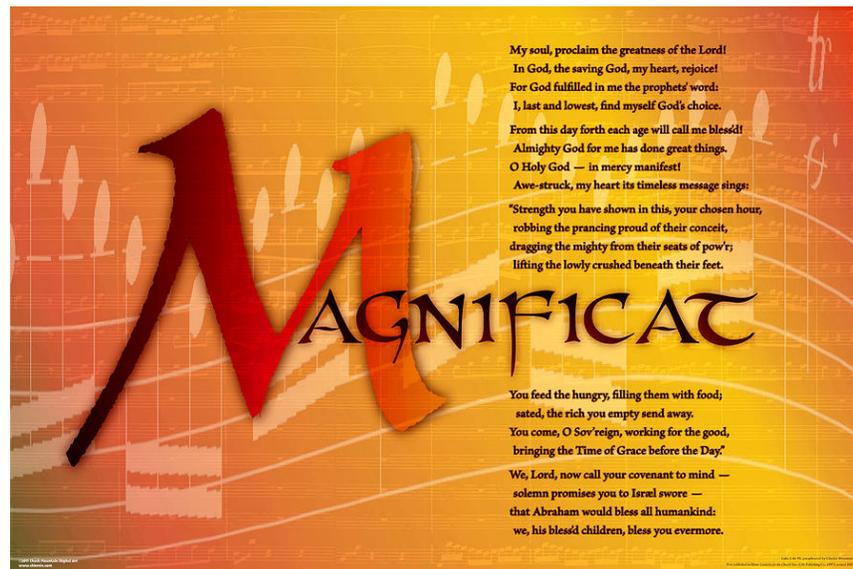
And his mercy is on them that fear him throughout all generations.

VI. ESURIENTES

He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away. He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel. As he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed for ever.

VII. GLORIA PATRI

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. Holy Mary, succor those in need, help the faint-hearted, support the weak: pray for the laity, assist the clergy, intercede for all devout women: may all feel the power of your help, whoever prays for your holy aid. Alleluia. As it was in the beginning, is now and every shall be, world without end. Amen.



Advent