

# Advent: Seeking Sanctuary (with Love)

## Fourth Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:39-55  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Two Sundays ago, I shared how the author of Luke opens his gospel in chapter one. We heard about an old priest, Zechariah, who was visited by the angel Gabriel with the message that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a child in her old age and name him John. After John is born, Zechariah's prophecies that his son, who will become John the Baptist, will prepare the way for the coming Messiah. The sermon dealt with the importance of laying a good foundation, especially for our children.

Today, we back up a bit in the story, part of which is often referred to as the Annunciation. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, we learn that the angel Gabriel visits Mary with the message that she will conceive a son and name him Jesus. He will bear the title of the Son of the Most High. After the angel tells Mary how all of this will come about, after she questions its unlikely possibility due to the fact that she has not had sexual relations, Gabriel tells her about Elizabeth's pregnancy in her old age and that nothing will be impossible for God. Mary responds with, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

This brings us up to the reading for this Fourth Sunday in Advent, **Luke 1:39-55**. We have previously been informed that Elizabeth and Mary are relatives and that Elizabeth spent her time of pregnancy in seclusion.

<sup>39</sup> In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,

<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who revere him  
from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;

<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,

<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

<sup>56</sup> And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home. (That would have been the time when Elizabeth was ready to give birth.)

On this Sunday before Christmas, what should we say about Mary? Back in 2016, I spent a good part of the entire season of Advent sharing how the traditions of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism differ in their approach to and interpretation of Mary. In fact, there's an entire branch of Christian theology called Mariology. As fascinating as that is, I won't be revisiting it again in today's sermon.

In other years, I've primarily focused on what has been termed Mary's Song, and will do so for a bit again this Sunday. This song in Luke is also 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" (Lk. 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 a very different picture of Mary from what many of us are familiar, as meek and mild and simply as a figurine in our nativity scenes.

**In a decidedly prophetic, and yes political call to justice, Mary recognizes God as the One who shakes up the status quo.** Mary's song serves the purpose of foreshadowing her own son's prophetic ministry that will do the very same thing. When Mary sings about being lowly, she is not just referring to humility, but also about poverty. We must not forget that Mary is young, poor, pregnant, and unmarried. Given these circumstances, the culture in which she lived would have looked upon her with shame and as someone to be despised and even rejected. But not by God! And that's the twist. That's also an important part of Jesus' own prophetic message of good news. 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. She sings of 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.'

Here at the beginning, Mary rejoices in God's destiny – for her, and for a world turned upside down.

**The prophetic words ascribed to Mary are the basis of a spirituality of revolution and resistance, a political protest song calling for the liberation of all victims of poverty and injustice. Mary's song must be our song, a call to hope and action for social transformation and a challenge to the status quo.**

Perhaps you noticed that we skipped right over the part of the story when after learning about becoming pregnant, Mary went with haste to spend the next three months with her relative Elizabeth. While we rarely focus on this part of the story, this is the portion focused on in the resource we are using this Advent season from a group of Presbyterians called, A Sanctified Art. With its theme, **Close To Home**, they focus this week on the topic of "Seeking Sanctuary," tying it into the theme of the fourth candle in the Advent Wreath, the Candle of Love. They summarize it this way.

After receiving the angel's extraordinary news, Mary retreats to Elizabeth and Zechariah's home to digest her new calling. She seeks refuge—physical safety and emotional protection. She receives a safe haven, a home for her heart to soon sing praise. Sanctuary and safe space is so crucial for everyone, especially the mother of Christ while she prepares to become a home for God. **Sanctuary is anywhere God's love dwells freely and abundantly.**

Commenting on this passage of scripture, resource commentator Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Oliviere shares some lyrics from a **song called "Sanctuary" by singer Carrie Newcomer.**

*Will you be my refuge, my haven in the storm,  
Will you keep the embers warm when my fire's all but gone?  
Will you remember, and bring me sprigs of rosemary,  
Be my sanctuary 'til I can carry on, carry on, carry on. . ."*

In the song, Newcomer lists places, experiences, and metaphors to define sanctuary, all of which are uplifting and welcoming. So let me ask, if you were to make a list what safe places and experiences of sanctuary would your list include? If you close your eyes, can you picture yourself there?

Cintrón-Oliviere continues, "Wherever it is, a place where God's love dwells freely and abundantly is sanctuary. Hearing the news of her pregnancy, Mary sought such a place. As a pregnant teenager, poor and unwed, dangers and uncertainty—both physical and societal—surrounded her. With haste, she journeys to Elizabeth's house. Elizabeth—and the child in her womb—welcome and affirm her. Mary then bursts into a song of praise: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (v. 46-7).

“For three months, that home and the arms that received Mary became her safe haven. Elizabeth’s welcome, blessing, and care were safe space, just what she needed as she prepared for the important call ahead. **Mary would give birth to Jesus and would educate him in his formative years. The world saw the imprint of this young woman in the life and teachings of her son, Jesus. Mary herself was sanctuary and Jesus’ first home.**

**“Sanctuary is not only a place. It is also the people who say, “Here I am,” striving to create and to become a safe place for others.** Will we be a refuge, someone’s haven in the storm, sanctuary? In the spirit of these two holy women, Mary and Elizabeth, may we offer ourselves as sanctuary for anyone in need of one—glorifying, with our actions, the One whose love, freely given, is our sanctuary, our home. So, ponder in your heart this week during your final preparations for Christmas:

- **What are the places and spaces of sanctuary for you?**
- **Who are the people in your life who provide safe refuge?**

For it is when we receive safe refuge that we have the capacity to provide sanctuary for others. Therefore:

- **In what ways is our faith community, College Hill, providing sanctuary, becoming a space where God’s love dwells freely and abundantly?**

Perhaps, in fact, it is only when we feel close to home in a place/space of sanctuary that we are fully able to sing and act upon Mary’s song of protest, revolution, and resistance in order to challenge the status quo and help bring about the kin-dom of God in which all are free from oppression and injustice.

**And yet, perhaps finding sanctuary is something you still find illusive. If so, hear these words in the poem “Come On Home” by resource liturgist and poet, Sarah (Are) Speed.**

### **Come on Home**

By Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed - Sanctifiedart.org

We all know the feeling—  
the shaky ground,  
sinking sand,  
water-is-rising,  
sun-is-fading feeling  
that makes steady breathing  
an entire miracle,  
and holding back tears  
a marvel in and of itself.

And when those days come,  
I call my parents.  
And I call my church,  
and I call my friends,

and they say in unison  
what God has said  
from the very beginning,  
which is, "Come on home."

Is there anything more healing  
than an open door?  
If you're seeking sanctuary,  
if the waters are rising—  
listen.  
It may be hard to hear,  
but God is always saying,  
"Come on home."

Let us all heed this call!

Amen.