

*Advent 4.*

*The Rev. Emily E. Given - Church of the Messiah*

*(Please note, these are sermon notes and not a formal manuscript.)*

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior. Amen.*

“Shout out to all the little girls who didn’t get a turn to play Mary in the Christmas pageant and grew up to be women who preach on the Magnificat anyway.”

This Facebook post came across my feed during the week, and I felt seen. It made me think about all those sweet little girls wearing pale blue while swaddling their plastic baby dolls or standing next to a real, live, squirming baby “asleep in the hay.”

This Mary is often described as “meek and mild.” I don’t buy... do you? I think we sell Mary short when we imagine her that way.

The interesting thing about the internet is how one can search for things more quickly than ever before and then stumble across data one didn’t even realize one needed. A search result offered an alarming statistic. In Christmas carols, the angels are mentioned five times more than Mary. Even the wise men receive more mentions than her. How can someone so central to the powerful message of our Emmanuel - God with us - be overlooked and mischaracterized like Mary?

The Gospel today retells a portion of Mary’s visit with her cousin Elizabeth while they were both pregnant - Mary with Jesus and Elizabeth with the one known as John the Baptist.

This time together was not just a coffee clatch between two women or a mini family reunion. It was a mother’s manifesto to the power of God.

Mary and Elizabeth were women who said “yes” to God with their bodies and spirits. Elizabeth was far older than the expected childbearing window, and Mary was called to be the Theotokos - the God-Bearer. Elizabeth immediately saw what Mary was asked to do and uttered the very human statement, “ How did I get so lucky to know you!?”

When Elizabeth calls Mary her rightful name—“Mother of my Lord,” Mary proclaims what she knows to be true about herself and the unfolding of the “Word Made Flesh.”

Mary was more than a passive, consenting figure; she was an agent for reconciliation in the world.

Mary “magnified” and “rejoiced.” She knew herself to be the one who was carrying the “Mighty One,” and that “Mighty One” was going to offer mercy, show strength, scatter the proud, dethrone earthly power, lift the lowly, and fill us. Make everything right.

And Mary was the one who made it possible. This made her “blessed”... a rockstar for all generations, not just in the moment. This promise was passed down through a people who continued to be guided and protected by the same God who kept God’s promises made with the matriarchs and patriarchs.

I received a Christmas gift from a dear friend this week that captures an ancient-modern view of Mary. She has her fist in the air stomping down injustice, wearing partially untied combat boots. She is not a gentle flower.

This image might not be your chosen image of Mary, and that’s okay. I invite you to think about who Mary is to you. Take her out of the safe place she has occupied in the Christmas story and consider how the God-bearer could inform how you view yourself as a God bearer in the world now.

Those who select the lectionary for this day include the Song of Mary as an option twice—as a canticle and as the Gospel. The message here is, “Don’t skip over this!” The Magnificat is a message being revealed to us in these last days before we celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Given this powerful and purposeful image of Mary, I suggest that we can’t go back to tucking her quietly into the nativity scene instead of magnifying her voice in our way? Mary issues a call to action. We are also called to offer mercy, show strength, and do our part to help lift the lowly.

Full disclosure. Mary is my girl. I don’t view her as an intermediary to Jesus like the Roman Catholic Church does, but I find her a compelling image of faithfulness and female strength.

Mary is part of why I offered my “yes” to God to come here to Messiah. It is a story I love to tell, so I apologize if you have heard it already. My favorite image of Mary is her as “the Untier or Knots” (or the undoer of knots). I first encountered this image of Mary in a thrift store in South Philly a few years ago. There on the shelf was Mary, standing on the moon and trampling down the snake, with a long, knotted cord in her hands. I had no idea what it meant, but I was drawn to her. As I walked around the store, I found

myself clutching her to my chest. When I returned home, I did a little research and discovered that there is an idea that Mary (like many good mamas) is thought to go before us and loosen up the knotted-up messes we are experiencing. I identified with that image as a mother of two humans, but then, when I considered myself as a child of God, having a little divine companionship in the loosening of my “knots” felt like something I needed.

When I came to Messiah for the onsite interview, I took the full tour in and around the whole campus. There is the robing room, was a larger version of the very same image I discovered in the thrift shop. It took me by surprise and I asked Brenda Weir, who was offering that part of the tour, “Is this always here or does it belong to Father David?” Brenda replied that , as far as she knew, it was also there. My heart warmed a bit and a sense of “this very well might be my place”. A part of me had already been here waiting to be connected.

Seeing that image, and experiencing how wonderfully welcoming you all were as a community, made me sense that we also already belonged to one another and together we would do just what Mary proclaimed in her song - to work to make the kingdom of God here a little closer to the image of what God had intended for us - a place filled with mercy, justice, and love.

The generational promises Mary named are ours. And in turn it is our role to magnify and rejoice in the gifts we have been given. So I encourage you to imagine Mary a different way. Find a way to help her claim her power in the story of the coming of Jesus. The God bearer. And go out to be a God sharer in the world. Amen,