

**Sunday, December 19, 2021**  
**Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year C)**

Luke 1.39-55

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/4575848569170710>

*(Sermon begins at about 20:50)*

**“My Soul Magnifies the Lord”**

Our Gospel readings for the last two weeks have centered on John the Baptist as the one who points the way to, who prepares the way for, the coming of the Lord. We have heard about John the Baptist out in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance. We have heard some classic John the Baptist quotes: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Lk 3.7-8a). And, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming: I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Lk 3.16). Through his words and actions, John points the way to a 30-year-old man who one day shows up at the River Jordan seeking to be baptized. The baptism that will mark the official beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. The baptism in which God will declare, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Lk 3.22b).

Today’s Gospel reading clearly demonstrates that John was pointing the way long before that pivotal moment on the banks of the River Jordan. John began pointing the way to Jesus while still in his mother’s womb. This Gospel that we just heard weaves together the stories of two cousins: Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, and Mary, mother of Jesus. As cousins, their stories were already intertwined. But this encounter, between Elizabeth six months pregnant with John and Mary newly pregnant with Jesus, brings the two cousins—Elizabeth and Mary—into God’s divine plan. Not only God’s plan for their lives, but God’s divine plan for all humanity. A plan that would be brought to fruition through two other cousins: John and Jesus. Beginning at the moment when the pregnant Mary walks into Elizabeth’s house and the unborn John leaps for joy at the presence of the One who is to come. Fulfilling the prophecy given to Zechariah when John’s birth was announced. As the angel Gabriel told Zechariah concerning John: “even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God” (Lk 1.15-16). Foreshadowing the events that will not take place for another 30 years when Jesus steps into the River Jordan and asks John to baptize him.

John leaping for joy in his mother’s womb at the presence of the yet-unborn Jesus prompts Elizabeth, also filled with the Holy Spirit, to extol the virtues of what Mary has consented to do. To bear God’s Son. To bear the savior of the world. To which Mary responds with one of the most well-known songs in all of Scripture: the Song of Mary. The Magnificat. “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 1.47-48a). Expressing her profound joy at being chosen to be a servant of God. Expressing her profound joy at what will be accomplished through her willingness to bear God’s Son. Expressing her profound joy—and maybe a little bit of motherly pride—at what her son will accomplish.

The Song of Mary evokes images of other songs of praise in Scripture: the Song of Moses and the Song of Miriam, both extolling praise to God for the defeat of the Egyptians at the Red Sea, liberating God's people and paving the way for their eventual return to the Promised Land. The Song of Deborah extolling praise of God for the defeat of the Canaanites, liberating God's people and paving the way for their eventual unification as a nation. And most closely paralleling the Song of Hannah, extolling Hannah's praise to God for the birth of her own son; offered upon dedication of Samuel to God's service—the prophet who would be instrumental in the establishment of Israel as a unified kingdom under Saul and reformed under David. And in all cases, songs demonstrating and praising God's faithfulness to God's people. Faithfulness that not only brings deliverance to the people, but emphasizing God's justice and mercy.

As Mary proclaims:

His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty. (Lk 1.50-53)

While overjoyed at being pregnant, while overjoyed at being given the honor and the privilege to bear God's Son and to bring him into the world, Mary recognizes that this is not about her. That her beloved unborn son will not be hers alone. That he will belong to the world. That he will be God's instrument for fulfilling God's purposes. The purposes that have been in the works since the beginning of time. As Mary says at the conclusion of her song of praise and her prophecy of what is to be achieved by her son, this is all, "according to the promise [God] made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever" (Lk 1.55).

Looking back through the lens of the Gospels, the Song of Mary could serve as a vision statement, of sorts, for who Jesus is and what Jesus will seek to accomplish. A prophetic statement foreshadowing the major themes of Jesus' life and ministry. That he will be the source of salvation which brings with it a great reversal to the status quo. A world where fear gives way to mercy. Where pride gives way to humility. Where power gives way to equality. Where self-interest gives way to compassion. Where scarcity gives way to plenty. Where hate gives way to love. This song is a radical statement of God's desires, of God's vision for humanity. A vision based solely on—that is an expression of—God's love for all his beloved children. The Song of Mary is a radical statement of love. A radical statement of God's radical love for each and every one of us.

Those of you who regularly, or even occasionally, attend Evening Prayer services know that the Song of Mary is not just something that we hear read on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. This song, perhaps one of the earliest Marian hymns, is the traditional response to the Scripture reading at Evening Prayer. Itself serving as a prayer, of sorts. A prayer, as when Mary proclaimed it, extolling praise to God for what has been accomplished through his Son. At the same time, a prayer of recognition that even though Jesus has lived, died, and been

resurrected, the Kingdom of God will not fully be realized until the end of the ages. A prayer recognizing that there is still so much that needs to be done to bring Mary's vision, to bring Christ's vision, to bring God's vision, to reality. And, again, at the same time, a prayer that this vision for humanity cannot be made reality soon enough. And yet again, at the same time, a prayer of commitment on our part, to seek to live more fully into the vows we made at our baptisms when we became members of the Body of Christ, to make God's vision for humanity our own vision. A prayer of commitment on our part to do the hard work of seeking to make that vision a reality in our own day. In our own little corners of the world.

I invite you to join with the mother of our Lord, in proclaiming God's vision of what love looks like. I invite you to join with me in renewing our commitment to God's vision for humanity. Please turn to page four of your bulletin and read with me the Song of Mary, beginning right after the line that reads, "And Mary said." Let us proclaim together:

"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.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

As we approach the end of this Advent season and prepare for the birth of our Lord, I invite you to carry the words of the Magnificat in your heart. For these are not just Mary's words. They are also yours. They are the words of those who follow the One whose birth we celebrate in one week's time. These words are our vision statement. Know that you are blessed, and that the mighty One has and will continue to do great things for you and through you, as we work to make God's vision a reality.