

**Sermon: Advent IV; Church of the Ascension  
Chicago, IL Dec. 23, 2018  
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Can the witness of a woman be believed? The answer to that question seems to be in doubt, in the age of the #MeToo movement, as it certainly was two thousand years ago when the four Evangelist wrote their Gospels.

While the New Testament was written by men, it is exceedingly important that we lift up the recorded significance of women in the Christian story. Have you noticed, in your reading of the Gospels, that the Gospel according to Luke begins and ends with the witness of women?

Women are the first witnesses of the two most important events recorded in the Gospels. – the Incarnation, - that God came among us in human form; and the Resurrection, - that God rose Jesus from the dead.

In ancient times, if you really, really wanted someone to believe the story you had written, you would not have the two main truths of that story dependent on the witness of women, unless this **IS** the truth about your story, and your task is to proclaim the truth about God’s action in Christ.

We can only imagine the pressure on the writer of Luke to change his story, to not have women as his primary witnesses. And yet there they are.

The fact that these women stand as primary witnesses, is actually a testimony to the truth of their witness. If their testimony is not true and they are not at the very center of the Gospel message, their witness would certainly have been removed.

Misogyny is a powerful force in our own time. It was even more powerful in time of Luke. Yet Luke’s Gospel witnesses prevail.

Luke comes down to us as the Church’s first historian. In his Gospel he makes numerous historical references; and he wrote the Acts of the Apostles, an early history of the Christian community.

What you may not be aware of though, is that Luke presents a very particular understanding in his Gospel, of how history was unfolding through the grace, will, and providence of God.

Luke believed that history, though God’s action in Christ, was on the verge of a **great reversal**. He believed that in God’s new Kingdom, everything will be turned upside down. “the first will be last, the last will be first.” Come to work in God’s Kingdom in the final hour, and you shall receive the wages of those who came at the earliest hour.

No wonder he is so intent on preserving the two Mary’s as his primary witnesses. He is determined not to have them removed from his story, because they too, are a sign of that great reversal.

We find ourselves on this Sunday, at the end of Advent and transitioning into Christmas. We read of the Annunciation to Mary and of Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth. At the very beginning of the mystery of the incarnation, Mary sings a song, the Magnificat, which has been used in Christian worship down through the ages.

To the casual observer, listening to this part of the Christian story, Mary might come into view as humble, pious, head bowed, quiet, and shy in her deportment. Art history of this event seems to affirm this view.

But if we pay careful attention to the text, the opposite is actually the case. As Mary finds herself in the presence of Elizabeth and begins to literally proclaim the Gospel, she is actually bold and charismatic. She does not merely recite this ancient hymn, she boldly and joyfully proclaims it as present reality. The Magnificat is unconventional, defiant, prophetic, and unsentimental. Mary is fierce, full of strength and purpose.

*He has shown might with His arm,  
He has scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.  
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,  
and has exalted the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.*

Thomas Hancock, the theologian of Anglo Catholic socialism called the Magnificat "the hymn of the universal social revolution" and the Marseillaise of humanity. Every nation has what is called its national hymn," he said, "but the Magnificat is the hymn of all peoples. It is the hymn of humanity." <sup>1</sup>

In the Magnificat, Mary not only announces a birth, she announces the inauguration of a new kingdom that stands in stark contrast to every other kingdom - past, present, and future – **that she and our history are on the verge of a great reversal.**

That kingdom is not in the interests of the powerful, but of the humble; not with the rich, but with the poor; not with the mighty, but with people on the margins; and not with wordily kings, but with the lowly and the hungry.

Mary's appearance, now in this final Sunday of Advent, is also the bright appearance of light in the midst of a world still warped in darkness. On this Sunday, the liturgical calendar, full of ageless wisdom, lights our path through the darkness and foreboding of Advent, into the bright joy and hope of Christmas.

But, as we all know, through personal experience, sometimes our preparation for the feast, our Advent observance, is often more poignant, than the actual celebration of the feast itself. I love Advent, as much as I love Christmas, because in Advent, I become deeply aware of the longing implicant in my spiritual journey, a longing that will eventually be fulfilled when Christ is all in

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<sup>1</sup> The hymn of the universal social revolution--St. Luke i, 46-55: A sermon; Thomas Hancock.

all. Christmas, and even Easter, are partly anticipatory as we continue to live in the world. The kingdom of God is inaugurated in these feasts, but not completed in time.

We continue to live in a broken world, and so our daily experience is as much akin to the hope of Advent, then the joy of Christmas.

If we find ourselves somewhat tired and a little down at the end of Christmas Day, (along with your thankfulness), we need not be alarmed, or think ill of ourselves. We are simply experiencing the limitation of living in a world in which God's kingdom still groans in travail to be completely born.

We are more advent people in our human experience in the world, than Christmas people. Our celebration of Christmas is tinted with a "not yet"; as we, and all people, continue to await the completion of God's kingdom, the final coming of Our Lord and the fulfilment of the ages. We need only look out the front door of this Church, or to read the daily news, to see the darkness of our world, despite the celebration of our feast.

Yet, we will want to be reminded that the darkness, the brokenness of the world, calls us into the depth of our humanity, and of our Christian faith and practice.

The womb is dark, is it not, as we continue to await the birth of a new age. The seed is sown in the darkness of the earth. Darkness is where birthing begins. It is the womb of a new time, a new age, and a new kingdom. Our birth pains are normal and expected, as we hope for and seek to play a part in the creation of a new world, through the exercise of our Christian faith.

We play the part that is ours in the deep knowledge, that in our relationship with Christ we come to experience what God is like; and in kinship with Mary we learn how to be a Christian. We are called to make her witness ours, to willingly birth Christ into **OUR** world, and to work towards history's great joyful reversal:

*For he who is mighty has done great things for me, . . .  
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones; . . .  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.                      Luke 1:49, 52-53*

If we listen carefully to Mary's song, we will hear the promotion of justice, but we shall hear the experience of joy. And so, we are not be robbed of our joy, in a sometimes dark and broken world. Was it not the promotion of joy that led Mary to ask Jesus to turn water into merry-making wine, even as that very wine was a sign of Christ's suffering hour. In the end we are both Advent and Christmas people – living in the great paradox of the not yet and the great light that fills the world with God's love.