

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

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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.

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.

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.

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.