

“In Remembrance of This Mercy”

Luke 1:39-45; Luke 1:46-56 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – December 19, 2021
Fourth Sunday of Advent

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open ourselves to your

Love as boldly as Mary and Elizabeth. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Scholars don't usually talk about Mary's Magnificat – those verses I just read – as an apocalyptic text, but given what we've learned about apocalypse over the past two years, I think the argument could be made. The pandemic has reminded us that one of the most important aspects of apocalypse – beyond the “end of the world” part – is that the word means revelation, that is, something important is being revealed. The current apocalypse has revealed a lot of things that have been there all along, which we'd been trying to ignore: the brokenness of our health care system, sinful levels of racial disparity in every aspect of our society, the human tendency to separate ourselves into opposing clans based on things that shouldn't have anything whatsoever to do with politics. The Magnificat speaks to this apocalyptic moment as well as any of our biblical texts.

But let's start with the apocalypse Mary herself was experiencing. The irony, of course, is that it seems most likely that Mary went off into the “hill country” to keep hidden. There is so much packed into that first sentence: “In those days” – that is, as soon as she heard she was pregnant. “Mary set out and went with haste” – before

anyone could find out what had happened. “to a Judean town in the hill country” – somewhere she wouldn’t be likely to bump into anyone she knew, and the exact location is none of your business, you nosy people. “where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth” – because trustworthy if distant relatives are the only ones you can really rely on in such situations. Teenage mother whisked away to a distant relative’s house until she’s been delivered and can come home looking normal, as if she’s just been on extended holiday; this is a tale we’ve heard before. The goal here was concealment, not revelation.

But that’s not what happened, is it? Because there was this other story going on underneath the pregnant teenager narrative, this revelation Mary had been given when the angel Gabriel invited her into what God was doing in the world. Mary had an inkling that something bigger was happening. But it was all still very scary and confusing, so she did head out to the hills, to the welcoming arms of her cousin Elizabeth, because who knew what was really going on? Maybe she had dreamed all that prophecy stuff. Maybe she was imagining that she’d been promised she’d found favor with God. So she stuffed all that down deep into her heart as she packed up her meager belongings and headed to the country.

But then she arrived, and as soon as she had greeted her older cousin, everything came springing back up, because Elizabeth recognized what was going on and confirmed the strange things that had been bubbling under the surface. The story that had been about going into hiding suddenly takes a dramatic turn and becomes a

story of revelation, a story of apocalypse, a story that can no longer be contained, but must be proclaimed, because it's going to change the world. And of course, when the world changes, it often feels as though the world is ending.

Mary's world was changing rather drastically. Does having your unplanned pregnancy affirmed as essential to cosmic salvation make it any less challenging to navigate the personal and social dynamics that sent Mary to the country in the first place? It's hard to say, but at least in what we have recorded, it did shift Mary's focus. Her proclamation is still about her own situation, but with a broader recognition of who she is in her society and what it means that God chose her. The fate of the world is now in the hands of an unwed teenage mother-to-be, one of the most vulnerable, intentionally overlooked persons in any society.

But once Elizabeth has affirmed what's happening, Mary is able to recognize what this means. All throughout history, human religion has wrestled with a tension between two opposing narratives: One sees God as mostly about power, an entity who may use that power against us, whose standards are impossible to meet or even to fully comprehend. This strain of religion has goaded humanity into coveting and abusing power, dividing people into hierarchical categories with varying degrees of power, and consecrating systems and structures that claim to make sense of the way some use their power over others. The other narrative proclaims a God of love and mercy, lifting up underdogs as heroes, and rejecting systems of oppression and division. Strengthened by Elizabeth's affirmation, Mary is able to recognize herself as

a major character in that second narrative – as proof, even, that the second narrative, the one about love and mercy, is ironically, more powerful than the narrative about power. It is not an accident that Jesus was born to a teenage mother, pregnant before her wedding, and not to an established queen in a palace. The fate of the world is in the hands of a teenage girl, seeking support from an older cousin. Seems a bit risky, perhaps, but have you met teenage girls? Because I have, and honestly, this seems like a fantastic choice to me!

We dismiss the proclamations of the young as melodrama to our own detriment. Young people all around us are making apocalyptic prophecies – about climate, about racism, about gender, about gun violence. Are we listening? Do we give their words the respect we presumably accord to the Magnificat? Did you hear what Mary said? God is bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. God is filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. God is scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. This is salvation. This is what Jesus' arrival into the world means. Everything is turned upside down, which, it turns out, is right side up. To the rich and powerful, it feels like the world is ending. To the lowly and dispossessed, it feels like revelation. It is apocalypse.

And under it all? This mercy, God's mercy to all generations, being remembered. This mercy is why apocalypse doesn't have to be something we fear. Sure, we may be knocked down from our thrones, some of us. But once we are, we'll come to see that what we were doing up there wasn't the life God intended for us in

the first place. When our lives are postures of power over others, God's mercy helps us down into holiness and right relation. What feels like destruction is revealed as healing.

Those kids these days, they're not trying to scare us; they're asking us to affirm their deepest hopes in the face of fear. They are heralding an apocalypse, and they need us to remind them that all of time is held in the arms of God's mercy. They will be the ones to carry this forward; they will bear the brunt of the burden of the world-changing that is coming. They need us to offer Elizabethan encouragement, so that they can claim their roles as God-bearers and proclaimers of mercy. They will scatter our thoughts, and if we're wise, we will admit that our thoughts needed scattering.

We have forgotten to let our thoughts wander widely, and thus have neglected thinking of all those God needs us to attend to. Apocalypse has narrowed our thoughts to an obsession with our own survival, or worse, into a form of denial that refuses to consider how things are shifting around us. Let us pray that we might be visited by the young, seeking our encouragement and offering opportunities to have our thoughts scattered more broadly.

You have a story of what happened when God's mercy was remembered in your life. That is the gift you can give a young person seeking affirmation. They know there's an apocalypse happening. What they need to be reminded is that God's mercy is undergirding the upheaval. They need to know that the narrative of love and mercy, the one that uplifts the lowly, the underdogs, is the true one. That the stories

that consecrate unjust systems of power are not the stories that tell the whole truth. They need to know just how likely it is that God is choosing them to usher in world-changing compassion. They need to hear your stories of God's mercy being remembered, so they can know where true power lies.

Maybe, like Elizabeth, mercy was a late arrival in your life. Maybe the blessings of this mercy were mere hints. But those stories matter. How they shaped your life, your hospitality and your generosity, matters. These stories, these remembrances of mercy, are what inspire courage. And courage, courage that's rooted in trusting God's mercy, is exactly what we need to carry us through an apocalypse, whether we're old or young.

Did you hear what happened at the end of our story today? Mary went home. Not after having been delivered of her out-of-wedlock child, but only three months later, right when it would have been obvious to everyone what was going on. She no longer desired to hide, for she had an apocalypse to proclaim, a revelation of hope and salvation, a declaration of the end of the world of power abuse and deprivation. Girded by Elizabeth's affirmation, she was prepared to bear God into the world, to usher in the change we long for still, to take on her role in the making right of the world. However God's mercy is remembered in our lives, may we live with the courage and trust of Mary and Elizabeth, offering affirmation and proclaiming mercy wherever we go. Hallelujah and Amen!