

Micah 5:2-5a
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-55

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³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Have you ever noticed how many conversations about Christmas begin with the words, "we *always*..."? And then you will talk about what you *always* do at Christmastime and your friend will tell you what they *always* do – and it's important to you. Family activities, favorite songs, favorite arrangements of songs, certain foods – often following the exact recipe year after year. Decorations need to be put in the same place. There may be fondness as you unpack each ornament and, perhaps, remember a story of how you got it. Timing is important. You know when you are supposed to decorate and when you are to exchange gifts.

I don't think there is any other season of the year that can compare with Christmastime for traditions, nostalgia, and the confusion of habit with morality. ("It's just *wrong* to do things differently.")

I don't know why this is true. It might have something to do with people being in a generally good mood. There are individual exceptions, of course, but there is a communal

agreement that generosity and hospitality are in order and that is a good way for us to be. This society will never be perfect, but there is a fair percentage of us who would make the case that Christmastime gets closer than any other time. Co-workers, strangers, government officials, media outlets, all concur (or, at least, acquiesce) that we will give each other presents, and take some time off from work, and families will try to get together, and the president will pardon some people in prison, and there will be lots of decorations. It's not perfect, but it's better than usual. Why change?

We like this time of year and we try to keep it exactly the same. If you want to change something – maybe you should change February. It's cold, and it's late enough to worry about taxes but it's still too early to look forward to spring break. Leave December alone. Let's do it all again next year.

One of the mainstays of our traditions is the Blessed Virgin Mary. She's in nativity scenes and on ornaments. Yet, if you asked most people about Mary the Mother of Jesus, it is more likely that they could tell you what they think she looked like than they could tell you anything she said. Our Gospel lesson this morning is part of Mary's famous song, called *The Magnificat*. (It's called that because that is the Latin for her opening words. In English, we have translated her opening words as "My soul magnifies the Lord.") This is not a song that celebrates traditions. It does not have anything good to say about the security of keeping things the same.

"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." This girl is singing about revolution.

It is ironic. The season that we celebrate the most when it changes the least – began as a season that turned the world upside down. We read this morning that Mary went to see her cousin, Elizabeth, and when they saw each other they did not compare notes about what they always did this time of year. They wondered what God was up to in a world they could no longer recognize. Elizabeth said Mary was blessed, not because she would provide a steady, unchanging model for the Christmas card industry – but because she believed God would use her to change things.

The words of Mary would have caused resentment in a world that prized traditions as much then as we do today. The great ones of the earth would not welcome this salvation. We read about the early days of the sedition in this passage. As soon as the rebellion became better known, officials tried to stamp it out. The revolutionaries kept a low profile, first in Egypt then in Nazareth, but the proud and the powerful knew a threat when they heard one and conflict was inevitable.

We also know a threat when we hear one, and we love tradition. So I think we would rather see Mary, dressed in her traditional blue, with her hands folded traditionally, and her mouth closed. We have domesticated Christmas. Now it urges people to be good, and it brings people together, but it abhors change. So the Budweiser Clydesdales claim a stronger sense of place in our society than Mary's song of hope. The radio stations that are currently playing equal parts of Christmas songs and Christmas commercials would start receiving some angry calls if Mary got hold of the microphone and started talking about the re-distribution of wealth and bringing down the powerful people of our society. We want Christmas; we don't want a fanatic. "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."

There is a difference in this revolution. It is just as threatening to the powerful of the world as all of the other revolutions that have come and gone, but there is a difference. With all of the other revolutions the goal is to overthrow the powerful and the revolutionaries take

their place. That's not what Mary has in mind. She does not sing about what she will do when she gets to be powerful; she sings about what God has done. The throne of God's Kingdom is no more for her than it is for the rich and the powerful. God has helped his servant Israel; he is merciful; he keeps his promises.

It is a revolution, but it is not a grab for power. Mary is celebrating that this Kingdom is out of her hands. The powerful of this earth are not in charge, but neither is she. Today, we aren't in charge, either.

If we were in charge, we would be justified in keeping things exactly the way we like them. But this is God's Kingdom and his followers must live by his guidance. The church cannot be true to Christ unless it is making people restless. If it preaches contentment, it has forgotten the reason Christ came. We are to continue the revolution. We must be rebellious against poverty, anxiety, lack of meaning, greed.

Don't settle for a generic good feeling of people being pleasant to one another. Christmas is a celebration of God changing the world. This world belongs to God and this baby has been born to take it back for its rightful owner.

It will be a struggle. We celebrate that God has the power to win. We celebrate the power of generosity over greed, the power of peace over violence, the power of forgiveness over condemnation. These are not values the world has agreed upon. Mary's song is about God's power in a world that doesn't recognize him. It is a song worth singing. It will change our lives.

Enjoy all the traditions that you love. But reserve the true depth of celebration for the change that God wants to bring for his Kingdom.