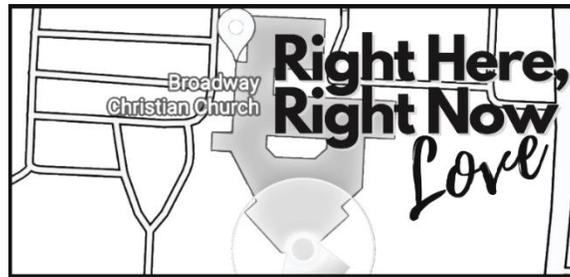




Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • December 19, 2021
The Fourth Sunday of Advent



The Scripture
Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said, "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."

The Message
"Right Here, Right Now: Love"
Mark Briley

I heard someone say this week, "I hate it when people ask me if I'm ready for Christmas. No Susan. I'm not even ready for today." I'm pretty sure no Susan's were harmed in this Christmas readiness exchange, but I don't know that for sure. Can you relate to this? Are you ready for Christmas? Retailers like to remind us how many shopping days are left, and we've all got a few of those things that must happen before we feel truly ready for Christmas.

You know who wasn't quite ready for Christmas? Mary. She didn't know what Christmas was, true. But she knew she was pregnant. She knew the circumstances were atypical. And while she accepted the role the angel asked her to play, she hadn't spoken a word to anyone about it. Who do you tell these sorts of things? She could have texted her fiancé Joe: "*We need to talk.*" Everybody dreads the "*We need to talk,*" text. She wasn't ready for that. She could have gone to her folks, but she wasn't ready for their over-reaction and ensuing interrogation. She could have taken her best friend to dinner at Murry's. Those green pepper rings are delicious after all. More importantly, it's quiet, you can talk discreetly and it's dark as all get out. You enter Murry's in full sun at lunch. Your eyes adjust. You're convinced it's nighttime until you open that front door, and you have a blinding Damascus Road experience. So... no Murry's for Mary. She's not ready for all of that. Mary's not ready for Christmas.

So, what does she do? The angel mentions that Mary's much-older cousin, Elizabeth, was also expecting, and Mary knew that had to be fake news. But what if it wasn't? What if it was true? Maybe her news would be true, too. Could it be? She pulls a few essentials together, grabs some protein bars, and stuffs it all in her backpack. Fills her thermos and heads for the hills where Elizabeth lives. This was no small trek – would take about eight or nine days by foot with stops in strategic places where she could refill her water. And there were mountains! But she was clear. If she was ever going to be ready for Christmas, she was going to confide in Elizabeth first.

While we give Mary a hot minute to get over to Liz's where we'll pick up today's account from Scripture, I'll ask *you* to ponder what's on Mary's spirit. Is there someone you need to confide in to be ready for Christmas this week? Is there something you need to clear from your heart? Is there some reassurance you need? It's a love thing. And Love is our focus this final Sunday of Advent. It's the grandparent of all the Advent Sundays. Love is hope, peace, and joy all wrapped into one. And even when we can't name it, we need it, we seek it, we're lost until we settle into it.

And you may be questioning whether or not our world has lost *it* for good. We've been waiting a long time for *it* to change. "*It*" is so many things, right? You've got your own "*it*" that you're carrying with you right here, right now. There are moments, however, when you sense we could be on the cusp of change. *It* could change. *It* could grow. *It* could finally happen. God, in Christ, constantly lives in this space and when *we* see *it*, it seems like the whole world could change.

Mary saw *it*, at least a glimpse of its possibility. She is playing the scenario's over and over as she travels – this invitation of Love to come into the world through her. Could you see *it* into the world, too? It seems lofty.

Our lyric of focus from Jesus Jones' song, *Right Here, Right Now*, today is the opening line of verse two: *"I saw the decade in, when it seemed the world could change."* Does it seem like the world could change? We've got more doubters than believers of that possibility it seems. A church friend passed along a word this week of another who was stuck on this question. It said this...

"Sometimes I just want it to stop. Talk of COVID, protests, looting, brutality. I lose my way. I become convinced that this "new normal" is real life. But then I meet an 87-year-old who talks of living through Polio, diphtheria, Vietnam, protests and yet is still enchanted with life. He seemed surprised when I said [this year] must be especially challenging for him. "No," he said slowly looking me straight in the eyes, "I learned a long time ago to not see the world through the printed headlines. I see the world through the people that surround me. I see the world with the realization that we love big. Therefore, I just choose to write my own headlines. "Husband loves wife today." "Family drops everything to come to Grandma's bedside." "He patted my hand." "Old man, makes new friend."

The man's words collide with my worries, [she wrote], freeing them from the tether I had been holding tight. They float away. I am left with a renewed spirit. My headline now reads, "Woman overwhelmed by the spirit of kindness and the reminder that our capacity to love is never ending."¹

Mary rolls into Elizabeth's place seeking some love for the headline she's now bearing like a bumper sticker, *"Proud Parent-to-be of the Savior of the World."* The adjective may have been Scared parent-to-be, or Uncertain, or Exhausted, or Stressed. What does Elizabeth do for Mary once she lays eyes on her? She wraps her in reassuring love and Mary immediately starts to believe that the world could change. Liz says, *"I see you, Mary. I see the glow. I see the love. And cuz, you can do this."*

We all need an Elizabeth, an older, wiser, more seasoned, trusted soul who speaks love into our lives when the world wants only to spew judgment or unsolicited advice. And when Mary relaxes her soul into Liz's love, Mary sings. That kind of love makes you sing, you know?

I have seen people sing in public and even with a microphone who had no real business doing so except that love's courage compelled them to sing. While those of us not directly engaged in that singing effort of love hear only tone-deaf noise, those wrapped up in the love hear the sweetest sound. Love makes you sing.

¹ The author or origin of this piece is unknown. It was shared by a friend on social media without cited source.

Our first Valentine's Day as a married couple, I was a student at MU, and Carrie had started working for Boone Central Title downtown. I called her boss and said I'd like to surprise Carrie at the office that day by bringing in my guitar and serenading her at the office. I got the reluctant okay from the boss, and it was on. I had zero thought that this might embarrass Carrie at her relatively new place of employment, or that I might make a scene of some kind. I just loved that woman, and it was Valentine's Day, and I wanted her to know so. So, I walked into the office, guitar in hand, and belted out Adam Sandler's "*Grow Old with You*" from the movie, *The Wedding Singer*. It was a showstopper for sure. Everyone stopped what they were doing – folks closing on their homes, serious business meetings in full force, and my wife of six months, wide-eyed and red faced. I thought it was the best of surprises. Probably not Carrie's favorite surprise ever but she hugged me anyway.

Love sings. And singing gets us ready for Christmas. It's why every singer has a Christmas album – even the likes of Neil Diamond who is Jewish, and there's a compilation album called, "*Snoop Dogg Presents Christmas in tha Dogg House*." That's D-O-double-G of course. Mary's first track on her Christmas album is called the *Magnificat* which, in Latin, simply means *magnify*.

"*My soul magnifies the Lord,*" she sings. This is a love song. This is *Love's* song. It expressed Mary's love in a way she had not yet been able to express.

You want your children to be honest with you, or you're looking for a vulnerable word from someone in your life – affirm them first. Let them know they are loved. Liz could have worked Mary over, but she shows Mary love and Mary sings. She pours out her heart.

This happens all over Scripture. When God's people were happy, they sang. When they were sad, they sang. When they were afraid, they sang. And the *best* songs are love songs.

It's been one of the many tough spots of COVID and the church. When our services were virtual only... or for those watching online right now, did you, or do you, sing out when we sing in worship? I love to sing, and so does my family, but when we were home worshiping virtually only, our singing suffered. We just didn't sing so much or just sort of mouthed the words. When we began gathering back in person and there was concern about projected droplets from singing, we were advised to hum along or mouth the words, but the message was don't sing out, please. But singing is so good for the soul. It's good for our mental health, our spiritual health, and even our physical health. It is such a genuine expression of love... our youth are going caroling tonight if you want to tag along.

Pastor Adam Hamilton² shared some studies about singing that are so fitting here. In 2015, the Journal *Frontiers in Psychology* noted that cortisol in saliva (*which is produced by a stress hormone*) dropped significantly when singing. Singing is a stress relief. A few years prior, the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* promoted that singing out loud produces high levels of Immunoglobulin A, which helps prevent infections. Another study showed singing with a group, no matter how small, releases endorphins which produce feelings of wellbeing. And get this! In 2008, a study revealed singing can reduce snoring! Crank up the tunes, ya'll! Singing can also enhance our ability to remember which has introduced musical therapy treatments for those who struggle with memory function. A study of a group of choir members demonstrated that singing with the choir for twelve weeks improved self-esteem.

But Mary doesn't sing with the knowledge of any of these studies; she sings because Love has included her in something magnificent, and with Elizabeth's affirmation, Mary allows her mind, body, and spirit to believe that God is actively doing amazing things through her.

As my buddy likes to quote '90s R&B group, En Vogue, "*Free your mind, and the rest will follow.*" To be ready for Christmas, free your mind, friends. Open yourself to God's love in a new and broader way. It's a lot to take in – Mary would say, "*Tell me about it,*" but this Incarnation – God coming to us in human flesh – is untheological, says writer Frederick Buechner. He says, "*It is unsophisticated. It is undignified. But according to Christianity, it is the way things are.*"

And Mary is in. Her song is one of inclusion – God has pulled in the unexpected players to be on the team. God says, "*Love's coming to town in this way, and when Love shows up, it brings up the lowly and humbles the proud.*" Are you ready for this? This is Christmas. Mary's prophetic song says, "*The hungry will be filled with good things and the rich will be sent away empty.*"

There's a word. Am I hungry or am I rich? Am I eager or am I apathetic? Do I have the passion to keep seeking God, or is my spiritual growth stunted? Hungry or rich? Interesting questions Mary's song provides. But make no mistake about it, the Magnificat is a love song. And Love changes things.

Mary's Magnificat is mashed up with Jesus Jones, and she sings, "*I saw the decade in, and it seems the world could change.*" It can. I've been skeptical like maybe you have been. Folks can be very cynical. But they just aren't ready for Christmas yet. You can bring the spirit of love that breaks down barriers and brings up those who are down. You have that ability. Did you know?

² Hamilton serves as Lead Pastor of The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, KS. www.cor.org. This piece about singing was shared in his December 12, 2021, message entitled, "*Learning Joy from Elizabeth and Mary.*"

Some dear friends in Tulsa had a fire in their home this week... in the middle of the night... did lots of damage and my friend says to me, *“God is awesome, and we don’t always understand. We’re thankful we’re okay and thankful for so many who have come alongside to love us.”*

You have the ability to come alongside. Another friend was anxiously awaiting news and it finally came. He received it with mixed emotions – thinking he wanted one thing but in the news struggling with his heart that found more longing for the opposite. But love gifted us the chance to come alongside each other. And do you know how it feels to be invited into something sacred like that in another’s life? Its love made manifest. Elizabeth does this for Mary and Mary’s child? Well. Jesus came alongside of humanity that proved beyond a shadow of doubt that the world can change. How can you come alongside someone this week? Maybe that’s what you still need to do to be ready for Christmas.

I had an awesome opportunity this week to bear witness to my son’s desire to come alongside. It was a spontaneous moment of generosity. I love this about him. He strategized a plan. It benefited him in no way other than the gift that comes in the giving. He blessed someone with zero strings attached and the message that arrived in my inbox later from the recipient ended with this line that I’ve been pondering since: *“I’m officially more ready for Christmas.”*

It’s always hard to be all-the-way ready for anything, right? Are you ready to be a parent? Ready to leave a job without knowing what’s next? Ready to retire? Ready to say goodbye? Ready for Christmas? Maybe we’re never all the way ready. Maybe the goal, and the gift we have as we come alongside each other in this walk of life we share, is to be *more* ready than we were before. *Do* a kindness. *Be* a kindness. Sing with full voice. Care for someone else. In the sharing, we may not only help others be more ready for Christmas, but we just may find we’re more ready for Christmas, too.

May it be so...

Song of Focus

“My Soul Magnifies You, My Lord”

WORDS AND MUSIC BY ED VARNUM

My soul magnifies you, Jesus, my Lord.
You bless me to carry your peace to this world.
Born in my spirit and embraced in your love,
My soul magnifies you, my Lord.
My spirit rejoices in my Savior, my Lord.
Living by your grace, my joy restored.

God's love incarnate in ministry outpoured,
My soul magnifies you, my Lord.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH