

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Advent 4 Meditation
Micah 5:2a-5; Ps. 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)
Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake

Italian Renaissance artists were fascinated with that moment when the angel appeared to Mary, and they painted it *gorgeously*. Frederick Buechner captures it beautifully in words:

*The pastel blues and pinks and purples, the angel's shimmering wings. Mary's look of quiet wonder, her head tilted toward the angel as his head tilted toward hers. He tells her not to be afraid, but he is quaking in fear at the thought that the history of humankind now depends on the answer of a young girl.*¹

One of the best images of this scene, by Fra Angelico, hangs on the wall of the monastery of San Marcos in Florence, at the head of the stairs where the monks could see it every night before retiring.

"Do not be afraid," the angel tells Mary. Of course she is deeply afraid, perplexed, and anxious. *"How can this be?"* she asks him, but the real questions in her heart are, *"What am I going to tell my parents, and what will the neighbors think?"* Most frightening of all, what is she going to tell her fiancé?

So she visits Elizabeth, an older relative, her aunt perhaps, who is six months along in her own unlikely and unexpected pregnancy. Elizabeth opens her home and her arms and her heart. She thinks Mary's embarrassing, awkward, and morally questionable condition is just wonderful. *"Blessed are you among women,"* Elizabeth says to the frightened, marginalized adolescent. Every teenager needs an aunt like that, or a caring, responsible adult like Elizabeth.

That's the moment when Mary finally speaks, and what words they are! *"My soul magnifies the Lord, ... for [God] has looked with favor on the lowliness of [God's] servant."* Then Mary describes what God has done and will do, a list that does not appear on Christmas cards. God has *"scattered the proud, ... brought down the powerful from their thrones, ... filled the hungry ..., and sent the rich away empty"* (Luke 1:51-53).

Preachers (of course) can get in trouble for saying things like that. There are places in the world (Argentina, for instance) where the Magnificat is not translated from Latin because of its troublesome political and economic ideas.

And yet, Mary's song, and before that her unlikely vocation to give birth to God's son, tells us something important about God, the true meaning of Christmas, and the believers' 365-day-a-year vocation.

You see, young, poor, vulnerable, morally marginalized Mary means that God comes into the world in unexpected ways, through the lives of humble, unlikely, and often excluded, marginalized people.

As this young woman asserts, God cares deeply and passionately about people and how they live. And God cares particularly about those who are shut out, people who are hungry in this abundant economy.

The Magnificat (I think) ought to make us uncomfortable with the reality of homelessness in this land of plenty, the reality that millions of our children go to bed hungry every night, the reality that our economy and tax structure exacerbate the gap between rich and poor.

God cares a lot about injustice and inequality and poverty and unnecessary human suffering.

Think of it this way: I know that some of you are familiar with Vivaldi's *Magnificat*. More know Vivaldi because of his *Four Seasons*, but it turns out there's more to Vivaldi than the rites of spring. This composer, who lived from 1678 to 1741, was also a Catholic priest and a violinist and spent most of his life in Venice.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 30

And this is where it gets interesting. How did Vivaldi earn a living? When he wrote his *Magnificat* he was working as choirmaster at the Pietà, a charitable home for orphans. And the orphanage had the acclaim of being home to Vivaldi. But there's another story. The orphanage funded its work with a fascinating and brilliant business model: *it trained the orphans to sing for their supper*. Vivaldi's job was to compose pieces of music for this choir to sing and thus attract a wealthy congregation that would support and finance the institution through its donations and bequests. And there's another dimension: Catholic Europe did not countenance mixed church choirs in the early 18th century. The boys were not a part of the choir. They left the orphanage and entered apprenticeships, while the girls stayed to constitute the choir. If you look at the score of the *Magnificat*, you'll see that the vocal bass parts are pitched high enough to be sung by an all-female choir.

Then if you look from the score of the music to the words of the canticle, you realize the significance of what Vivaldi was doing: *he was taking lower-class young girls, with no hopes, prospects, or protectors, giving them a song to sing, and offering them a chance to bring about their own redemption and the liberation of others like them*. They were truly singing Mary's song. Through them the Holy Spirit was exalting the humble and meek and sending the rich away a good deal emptier. They were incubating the gospel of transformation just as Mary, in her womb, was incubating the word of God.

It's a model that's been replicated elsewhere. Thirty years ago the *African Children's Choir* began training orphans from Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, and elsewhere to sing, and over three decades the organization has taken the groups on countless tours and raised large sums to finance orphanages, schools, and other institutions.

Notice the ways this business model marks out the Pietà and its imitators as a dynamic form of *social enterprise*. It doesn't depend on *pity*; it doesn't begin with *scarcity*. It starts with people's *talents* and *promise*, not their *neediness* and *suffering*. It doesn't assume that the people with money have the answers and the solutions while the people without money have the problems and the tragedy. *It is a philosophy of abundance*.

But neither is it *naive*: the children are not the finished article—they need *training*, like anyone else. And they need to sing really good music so that people come to hear *lively music*, not to patronize the *poor*. But in learning to be a choir the children learn the skills to be a *human being*: *partnership, discipline, teamwork, training—and, yes, business sense and entrepreneurial imagination*.²

Friends, the *Magnificat* is the great New Testament song of liberation—*personal and social, moral and economic*—a revolutionary document of intense conflict and victory. And the focus is on the might, holiness, and mercy of God, who has promised solidarity with those who *suffer* and who is true to those promises. God is "*magnified*" for effecting changes—now, in history.

Let us pray—

God of Wonder and Mystery: it is almost Christmas. We watch and wait for the Christ-child to be born, as we watch and wait for signs of Your coming into our world and our lives in an unexpected way. Call us to be with the lowly, the marginalized, the poor and the hungry. Call us to work in solidarity with the oppressed, rather than simple acts of charity that make us feel good. Call us to remember the young girl with child, who faced scrutiny and persecution. Call us to remember a people under the rule of empire, desperately waiting for change. Call us to remember how You came into our world and pulled the rug out from under us, and that You're about to do it again. Call us to remember, so we may be ready. Call us into Your labor and delivery of the new reign on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

² Samuel Wells, *Vivaldi's Business Plan*, The Christian Century, February 25, 2014