

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
December 18, 2022 – Advent 4  
“The Song of Mary” – Luke 1:46-55  
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During this time of the year, when people prepare for Christmas, I have observed that there is a great pull toward maintaining “traditions.” Many people seem to want the same things year after year – the same Christmas songs, the same family recipes, the same decorations, the same gifts, the same television specials – even the same Yule log burning forever without being consumed. This seems to be a season characterized by tradition. Now you may enjoy these traditions, or be indifferent to them, or be burdened or annoyed by them. You may decide to maintain traditions or discard them. The point I want to make is that “preserving” Christmas in “tradition” is in rather sharp contrast to the event we are preparing to celebrate – the birth of Jesus, God incarnate, an event that was different from anything anyone expected, the inbreaking of God into human history in a unique and radically new way.

If you were here last Sunday, you may remember that we prayed The Song of Mary then. So, you may be wondering why this morning's service began with The Song of Mary. It wasn't an oversight! I wanted to take the opportunity, on this last Sunday of Advent, to turn our attention to Jesus' mother, Mary. Her “Song,” found near the beginning of the Luke's Gospel, provides us with a rich reminder of many of the wonders God has done and continues to do.

The story of the birth of Jesus is a story filled with surprises. Young Mary had certainly not been expecting a visit nine months earlier from the angel Gabriel, who announced that she, an unmarried woman, would bear a son, Jesus. “The Song of Mary” is her response to hearing that news. The angel had said, “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32-33). Mary believed and we believe that all that is true, yet this Holy Child would be born on the road, in a stable, with the animals' food dish for a bed. Surprise after surprise!

Mary's song declares several surprising actions of God in human life and history. “He has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.” God's action in human life is often not at all what we expect, and sometimes may not be what we want. Let's look closely at one verse of The Song of Mary and consider what significance it may have for us. “He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.”

“[God] has filled the hungry with good things.” This action of God – and promise of future action – is reported all through scripture. We may think of the psalms: “The poor shall eat and be satisfied” (Psalm 22:26); “For [the Lord] satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things” (Psalm 107:9) or Jesus' words in the Beatitudes may come to mind: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6). God promises to fill the hungry with good things, perhaps we may say, with “God's things.”

This is good news if you are hungry. And who among us isn't hungry? We may not be hungry for food now, though some of us have probably experienced hunger in the past, and I never want to trivialize or “spiritualize” this most basic of human hungers. But I am sure that we are hungry for other good things, other basic human needs. We may hunger to feel valued or loved. We may hunger for companionship. We may hunger to be forgiven. We may hunger for

healing of our bodies or our minds or our spirits. We may hunger for safety and security, for comfort, for justice, for peace. We may hunger for God. We may hunger for these and many other good things for ourselves or for those we love or for strangers near and far.

God has promised to fill the hungry with good things, but God may not fill us with what we pray for or what we are sure we need most. God may very well surprise us. And our challenge may be to recognize the gifts God gives us even though they are not what we ask for or expect. Can we recognize the presence of God in the disrupted and uncomfortable places of our lives? Can we say “yes” to the salvation God offers, in God’s ways and on God’s terms, however odd they may seem? If we trust God’s promise and we train ourselves to look, we may be as delighted as Mary was with the extraordinary action of God in our lives – the unanticipated messengers of God, the paths forward made straight and passable, the unexpected blessings.

Now let’s look at the second half of the sentence: “and the rich he has sent away empty.” In one sense this is simply the reversal of God’s action in filling the hungry with good things. Life will be turned upside down – the “have nots” become the “haves” and the “haves” become the “have nots.” This appears to be good news for the hungry and bad news for the rich.

There is another way to look at these words, “and the rich he has sent away empty.” I believe that God calls each of us to empty ourselves, voluntarily, of the riches we have, for the good of God’s world and God’s creatures. In this room of people there is an extraordinary abundance of riches – knowledge, compassion, love of God and neighbor, deep spiritual life, money and material goods, skills and talents, commitment to the common good and to the protection and care of creation, and on and on. I don’t begin to know the riches in this parish. I believe that God calls us to go out beyond ourselves voluntarily and to share our riches.

At Christmas we celebrate the mystery of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. What does that mean? St. Paul writes in his letter to the church he established in Philippi: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Philippians 2:5-7). The theological term for this is “kenosis,” from the Greek word for “empty.” Christ, the second person of the Trinity, emptied himself to be born as a human being, to live as one of us, and even to die on the cross. This is the amazing action of God that we celebrate at Christmas.

As Christians we believe that our purpose in life is to become like Christ. St. Paul points to voluntary self-emptying as one way to imitate Christ and to join in God’s work of salvation. If we follow this path and count ourselves among the rich sent away empty by God, we will find that we are still “rich,” richer than ever, in fact, in the “good things” of God. The economy of Christian life is not a “zero sum economy” in which your gain is balanced by my loss. The economy of Christian life has been described by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who said, “I’ve sometimes joked and said God doesn’t know very much math, because when you give to others, it should be that you are subtracting from yourself. But in this incredible kind of way – I’ve certainly found that to be the case so many times – you gave, and it then seems like in fact you are making space for more to be given to you. In the end generosity is the best way of becoming more, more, and more joyful” (from “The Book of Joy”). One of the best traditions in the church and in the world at this time of year is that we are reminded to share with others, especially those who are less fortunate than we are. As Christmas approaches, may we all take time to ask ourselves – What shall we give in this holy season and all our lives for the love of God who has promised to fill us with good things? What shall we give for the love of the Child born in Bethlehem? May God lead us on the holy path of generosity to find joy. Amen.