

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
December 17, 2023 – The Third Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Canticle 15/Luke 1:46-55 – The Song of Mary
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

On the third Sunday of Advent we light the rose-colored Advent candle to honor Mary, the mother of Jesus. In place of the psalm we read Canticle 15, The Song of Mary, from the Gospel of Luke. Luke gives us the background to the birth of Jesus.

The angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear Jesus and that her relative Elizabeth, in her old age has conceived a son, who will be known as John the Baptist. Luke records that Mary went with haste to visit Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child in her womb leaped for joy. "And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'" Mary replied with the song we recited this morning, which we call the Magnificat, from the Latin translation of its opening words in traditional language, "my soul doth magnify the Lord."

In this morning's passage from Isaiah God declares, "For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing." Mary's song proclaims God's strength to correct injustice. "He has shown the strength of his arm, 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." We must look for God where the world would not expect to find God, among the lowly and poor. God chose a humble young woman to bear Jesus, and she gave birth to him in very humble circumstances. In Advent we prepare to bear witness to this remarkable work of God.

I would like to focus a spotlight on one sentence of the Song of Mary: "He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." On one level this is an expression of how God will bring justice where there has been injustice. There are always rich people who exploit poor people to remain rich and become richer. The biblical message is that this is not acceptable to God. We must not participate in exploiting others, and we are called to work with God to correct such injustice. The promise of the Song of Mary is that God will act to turn the tables. And God promises to fill the hungry with good things.

Do you know the American country music singer Patsy Cline? She hit her peak in the late 1950's, early 60's before she died in a plane crash at the age of thirty. She had a number of hit songs. One of my favorites is "Hungry for Love." I'd sing it for you myself, if I could. But then, if I could sing like Patsy Cline, I probably wouldn't be here doing this today! If you don't know her voice, listen to her on YouTube. She's great!

The lyrics of the song begin like this: "I'm hungry for love like a hobo for food, like the devil hunts for bad, like the angel looks for good." You won't be surprised to know that the love Patsy is hungry for is romantic love. She misses her man. She has done something to drive him away, and she pleads for him to forgive her and come home. Again and again she sings, "I'm hungry for love."

Advent season is a good time for us to be aware of our deep hunger for God and God's love. Many of the greatest Christian theologians and spiritual writers agree that all human beings have that hunger, because we are made in God's image, with a capacity to know and love God that is not fully satisfied in this life. We long for God.

But we don't always recognize our hunger for God for what it is. We seek to fill this hunger where it cannot truly be satisfied – with food, drugs, alcohol, relationships, work, hobbies, even church. This isn't surprising because it can be difficult to feel our hunger for God and to abide with our hunger. It is an act of faith to trust God and to wait patiently and with hope for God to fill the deep longing of our hearts. To trust the message spoken by the ancient Hebrew prophet Jeremiah: "If you seek me with all your heart, you will find me, says God" (Jeremiah 29:13). What the church teaches is that our true happiness, our state of fulfillment comes from nothing less than God. All other forms of happiness – including those that are good in themselves, like human love – are secondary to our relationship with God.

If it is true that our deepest hunger is for God and God's love, then what direction does that give us as we live our lives, as we wait for the fulfillment of God's promise to fill our deepest hunger? I find the clearest direction in the life and teaching of Jesus. In Luke's Gospel we read that after his baptism Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness being tempted and tested by the devil. At the end of this time Jesus was "filled with the power of the Spirit" and returned to Galilee. He went to the synagogue in Nazareth on the Sabbath, and he was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah to read. The passage Jesus read was the beginning of our lesson this morning, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And Jesus added this comment, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

If we trust Jesus for direction, then we will do what we can to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to comfort those who mourn, to help prisoners find liberty. While we wait with hope for God to fill our deepest hunger, we may seek God with all our hearts and do what we can to work for God's kingdom here and now.

On this third Sunday of Advent we honor Mary, blessed among women and venerated by many Christians in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican Churches as the "Queen of Heaven." She was a humble young woman. She was vulnerable because she was unmarried and pregnant. She was a Jew living in a land occupied by the Romans, forced to travel to Bethlehem at the end of her pregnancy to be registered for tax purposes, only to find no room at the inn. She gave birth to the savior of the world among beasts without the women of her family to help her. The Queen of Heaven.

There is a simple Shaker hymn called "Love is Little" that speaks to the humility of Mary and that can remind us of the direction our journey with her Son will take us: "Love is little, love is low, love will make my spirit grow. Grow in peace, grow in light, Love will do the thing that's right." So may it be for us and for all the lovers of God. Amen.