

The Reverend Theo Robinson's Sermon for December 14, 2025
Canticle 18; James 5:7-10
"A Song of Joy"

Prepare our hearts, oh God, to receive your word. Silence every voice in us but your own, so that we may hear your word. Amen.

The third Sunday in Advent is a rare moment when Protestant churches pay a little attention to Mary, mother of God. Mary is the first Christian – the first one to say “yes” to God’s crazy scheme to save the world through an unmarried Jewish teenager from the sticks. She is present at key points in Jesus’ ministry and even at his ascension and at Pentecost. She is a friend of the poor, mother of believers, the one who taught Jesus to pray and who teaches us.

The Canticle from the Gospel of Luke heard today is all about Mary. It’s her song of joy that is part of her resounding “yes” to God. Her beautiful song of praise is commonly called the Magnificat, from the Latin for “magnify.” Mary magnifies the Lord, proclaiming God’s greatness and rejoicing in God as Savior. She begins with God’s actions in her own life, for in choosing her to be the mother of the Messiah, the Mighty One has indeed “done great things for” her.

In Luke’s Gospel, we are told that Mary spent three months early in her pregnancy with her relative Elizabeth, who was also pregnant with her child, a child that would become John the Baptist. In the lines leading up to Mary’s Song of Praise, Elizabeth had just welcomed and honored her, saying, “blessed is she who believed.” Mary now recognizes with awe that not only Elizabeth, but all generations will call her blessed. But how blessed is she, really?

God has chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah, but in practical terms what does that mean for her? She is not from a family that can afford expensive food or clothing. She is a nobody, a peasant girl from a small village. Her friends and neighbors see her as a disgrace because she is unmarried and pregnant. Even Joseph was going to dump her. According to Matthew 1:19, “Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.” Being the mother of the Messiah is scarcely an unmixed blessing. She will bear the unspeakable grief of watching as her son is rejected, shamed, and crucified: “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too”.

Despite all this, Mary praises God for honoring her. Imagine the kind of strength it takes to praise God for upheaving her life, a life foretold to lead to a mother’s worst fear – outliving their child. Not to mention the fact that her child’s death will be utterly gruesome. I say again, despite all this, Mary praises God for honoring her. Mary sings about the God who saves not just souls, but embodied people. The God she celebrates is not content merely to point people toward heaven; God’s redemptive work begins here on earth. God fills the hungry not only with hope, but with food. Rather than being satisfied with comforting the lowly, Mary’s Lord lifts them up, granting them dignity and honor, a seat at the table, and a voice in the conversation.

At the same time, God shows strength by disrupting the world’s power structures, dethroning rulers, and humbling the mighty. Clearly such saving acts are good news for the poor and lowly, but what does Mary’s song mean for the wealthy and the powerful? Is there nothing but judgment for them?

Though judgment and salvation may seem like opposites, they go hand in hand. Those who stand in awe only of themselves and their own power will be judged. Yet by bringing them down – by emptying and humbling them – God is saving them. When they turn their gaze from themselves and their own accomplishments, when their awe is directed to God – then there is mercy for them, too. When God empties the rich of their excess and fills the hungry with good things, the result is not social reversal as much as it is social leveling. The rich and powerful are stripped of their arrogance and taught to love their neighbors as they love themselves. Thus God provides for the poor and honors the humiliated. When the arrogant are scattered and the powerful brought down, then every person has access to enough of the world's resources, and no one has too much. Every person is treated with dignity and respect, and no one uses power to harm.

Ultimately, Mary's song, The Magnificat, is a cry for justice. The rich, the proud, and the powerful who will all be brought down and scattered away, empty, are those who make it impossible for the hungry to be fed and the impoverished to be lifted up. James's letter also reminds us to be aware of the suffering that is caused by the world's corrosive and corrupting values. When James exhorts his readers to wait for the coming of the Lord, he not only instructs them to wait with patience, he presupposes that they are doing so in the midst of suffering. To read James in the season of Advent is to take time to pause, reflect, and recognize where in our lives we are unprepared to welcome Christ anew, and what values and choices have closed us off to Christ's presence in our midst. Reading James in the rhythm of the liturgical year is a corrective that cuts through the distractions of the "holiday season" and calls our attention back to Advent. James reminds us that this liturgical season of preparation is also a season of repentance and penance that must take seriously the suffering in our midst. Waiting patiently for the day of the Lord is, as James' entire letter suggests, a time for recognizing the values that shape our lives and communities and recalibrating them, as need be, so that they may be in accord with the wisdom that is from above.

James' letter along with Mary's song magnifies the Savior who loves the whole world with a love that makes creation whole. God's saving judgment is for all of us, bringing us down from the pride that fills us with ourselves until we can't see either God or neighbor, bringing us up from the shame that distorts our worldview and convinces us that no one, not even God, could love us.

The mother of the Messiah has experienced God's blessing. Mary's blessing, like ours, is a cross-shaped blessing, a blessing that brings true freedom, the priceless gift of God's salvation.

As is sung by Steve Bell, in his song called "Magnificat":

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord
And my spirit exalts in God my Saviour
For He has looked with mercy on my lowliness
And my name will be forever exalted
For the mighty God has done great things for me
And His mercy will reach from age to age
And holy, holy, holy is His name