

Today's scripture is called the "Magnificat", or Mary's song of praise. There is so much richness, so much praise and hope and pure faith in God's work in the world, and it's served as inspiration for faithful people for thousands of years, generations of people. It's certainly one of my favorite passages in all of scripture, providing me with guidance and deep hope in the work of God, of who God truly is for this woman Mary and for all of us, and I pray that her timeless words convict and inspire you all as well.

Mary's words and Mary's voice are what form the basis of this powerful song, this praise for the God who does wondrous things and is indeed love itself. So often in this time women were not given voices, they were talked about or talked at, rather than talked with, or really listened to. Oftentimes, when we hear songs, like in the Psalms too, the words are coming from the perspective of the human, the personal experience of God that the person was called to share. So in this case, we highlight Mary's experience like we rarely see in scripture, and that lifting up of Mary, the mother of Jesus' experience, gives even more power and recognition to the words she proclaims themselves.

Women's voices are powerful. It is the voice of Mary, a woman, who gave praise to God in the midst of Jesus growing and becoming the human Savior he is for all of us. It is the voices of the faithful women at the tomb who are the very first to proclaim the good news of the risen Jesus Christ. It is the voices of women who give us stories of saving countless people, from the Egyptian midwives who saved Hebrew babies from being killed by Pharaoh and his government, to Esther saving her Hebrew people through bold action, to the deacons Lydia and Phoebe who provided radical, risky hospitality to the early church leaders, and beyond. God chooses to reveal who God is through the words and witness, hospitality and hearts, courage and conviction, actions and aspirations, bravery and boldness of women throughout the Scriptures, and for this revelation of who God chooses and who God calls us to be even now, we give unending thanks.

God calls us to embody the traits of these faithful women who, even with all the odds stacked against them, lived in a way that loved and praised God

and actionably showed love for their neighbors. And God shows up for all people, especially those who perpetually feel that the odds are against them. A huge part of Mary's song of praise, the magnificat, is lifting up God's actions of bringing down the powerful from their thrones, sending the rich away empty, and scattering the hearts of the proud. These feel like bold statements to claim for many of us, but truly, God is on the side of the oppressed. God is on the side of the people who desperately need God's power of lifting high the lowly and those who are hungry, our siblings in need of being filled with good things. God is a God of justice, and only God can bring about that kind of holy and divine justice, the new creation that comes from God's responsive actions. These are the actions that Mary praises, that God is great and merciful and holy, especially to her, a servant of God, a humble person who takes one of the greatest actions possible to bring God's love in the world in a tangible way.

We talked about the incredible faith Mary has in our Wednesday Advent service last week, and her faith in taking on perhaps the world's most notorious motherhood is absolutely incredible. I wanted to understand more about motherhood in my preparation for this song of praise, so I talked with a few women who are mothers earlier this week. We talked about what it is to praise in the midst of the challenges of pregnancy. That even though your body is going through so many unbelievable changes and there are so many pains and symptoms associated with the growing of a human, there is still so much joy, and so much to be praised.

Certainly, praising God in the midst of pregnancy feels particularly powerful and poignant, words in communion with God our creator as mothers are the creators and nurturers of new life with all of who they are, bodies, minds, hearts, spirits.

But how much deeper could that joy go, with Mary's praise of God during her pregnancy with Jesus? If she is praising God in this song of praise, wouldn't she also be singing to the little one growing inside her?

We envisioned together the tenderness that comes with pregnancy, those moments of gentle talking, praying, singing to your little one as they grow.

And we thought about this song not only in its power to change the world and do these vast and life-saving things of turning injustice on its head, but in the intimate, warm, and nurturing power of Mary singing to her little one. That the same words which have inspired thousands of generations of people after her were also the words she sang to baby Jesus as he grew. That the praise she lifted up to our holy Creator God is the same praise she lovingly sang to baby Jesus. That even in the midst of the travel, the pain, the fear, the overwhelming nature of her calling, Mary still could not help but sing and give praise to God.

Is not love in this intimate way what we are truly created for? Is not this intimate love of a mother nurturing her baby the kind of love and relationship our heavenly Father God desires with us? Is not this deep and warm and beautiful love of creation what could heal us deeply?

This kind of deep and nurturing love is also the most vulnerable love in our lives. It means not only that we will not give up on someone, but that we will take action to do what we can to both keep the other alive and help them to flourish and have goodness in their lives. It requires relationship, a desire to know more and meet them where they are, without judgment or pretense but instead with grace and mercy. It means opening ourselves up to receive love in return, not just what we do for our beloved, but to truly accept and receive the love we are given, however that shows up, whether it follows our preferred script or not. It is tender, and brave, personal and courageous, trusting in God's movement and calling to this deep love.

So often we focus on the action, the big and forceful things that require big-picture, systemic kinds of moving and changing. While changing the systems for the better, out of love for God and neighbor, is absolutely necessary and holy work, the actual root of those changes has to come from a deep sense of love on a personal level, on the interpersonal, relationship kind of level. It begins with loving God, our source of all goodness and mercy, justice and grace, love no matter what comes our way, what we do or not do, who we are or who we aren't, love for us just as we were created to be. It continues with showing ourselves the kind of love

that heals and nurtures. And it grows with the intimate kind of love we experience with our families, our spouses, the people to whom we belong, our deepest beloveds. From the love we give and receive personally, we then share with our neighbors, to make the world a more loving place for all people, leaning into our call to love deeply.

How can we focus more on this deep and intimate, motherly kind of love in our lives? Could we not open our proud hearts more to the work of our loving God, who has been faithful to all the generations, including our generations now? Though the work of opening your heart to deeper love and intimate love is scary, it's vulnerable and often mixed in with fear, the bravery to open yourself to deep love is the most courageous thing we can do, in this season of the world more than ever. Let's meet each other with openness and hold each other gently, as mothers hold their babies, with life-saving firmness and yet a nurturing love too. God is with us and God desires to share this love with us, as God did when he chose to come into the world as a fellow human, born of Mary, grown into Jesus Christ our Savior. For this deep and vulnerable and life-saving love, given to us by God our creator and nurtured by the faithful Mary, we give our unending praise, alongside Mary, to God our Savior, the Mighty One, the one in whose arms we are all tenderly held. Thanks be to God, Amen.