

The Rev. Pamela Cooper-White

Reflection III: Luke 1:46-56 (the Magnificat)

Luke 1.46-56

46 And Mary^{*} said,

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

48 for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

56 And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

The first reflection we did today took us into our own selves, to ponder what God might be bringing to birth in our lives. In our second reflection we pondered what recognition we are longing to receive, and what recognition we might be needing to give to others—the dance of mutual love between one another, and between God and ourselves. Mary’s Magnificat ushers us into our third and final meditation today—on the hope for justice among people, and the fulfillment of God’s promise of mercy and a time of abundance and peace for all.

We are in the third movement of a symphony, if you will, or the third motion of a circular dance, in which we move from quiet contemplation on our individual souls, to contemplation on our relationships with other individuals, and finally, widening out to contemplate our relations with all our human sisters and brothers in the wider community and around the world.

This is a holy cycle, and no part of it is lesser, or unimportant. Some of you may have been walking the Labyrinth already today, and one of the things we notice about the Labyrinth right away, of course, is that it is filled with circular movements. It is a threefold path—circling inward toward the center, dwelling in the center or the heart, and then moving outward again. This is also in a sense what we have been doing today: moving inward to deepen our relationship with God and meet our own desire; dwelling with the need for God’s love and recognition; and being empowered to share that recognition with one another—first, in individual I-Thou relationships, and then, with the wider world.

Labyrinth walks, Quiet Days, and even prayer itself, is incomplete if it does not make the circuit inward and then outward again. God does not call us to stay “curved in upon ourselves,” to borrow a phrase from Martin Luther. On the contrary, contemplation is the gift that strengthens and empowers us to share love again with others. In the beautiful line from our Eucharistic Prayer C in the *Book of Common Prayer*, “We do not come to this table for solace

only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name.”

Mary knew what the coming of the Messiah meant—not just a personal Savior, but the One who would teach the world how to live. All the Jews in Mary’s day were waiting for a Redeemer who would overturn the cruelty and oppression of Roman rule, and restore a time of freedom and peace. Some were waiting for a warrior Messiah who would literally lead the people into battle against the rulers of that day. But as we know now, Jesus was a different kind of Messiah. He came to preach love, mercy, and forgiveness, and the Reign of God in which all the powers of injustice would be turned upside down and inside out. The Gospel of Luke shows this over and over again, as Jesus, and John before him, teach about the ways of God that are opposite from human greed and lust for power. Mary probably had no idea what Jesus would really do in his life, the vastness of his mission and his calling, but she knew because of his mysterious and Angel-announced beginnings that he would usher in God’s own vision for a future without sorrow, for all of God’s people beginning with the poorest, the lost, and the least.

So in Advent we wait for the healing of the earth, as well as the healing of our own souls and the healing of our relationships. It doesn’t take much prompting to think about all the places in the world where things are not right. Wars, famine, environmental degradation, poverty, torture. Abuse of persons and abuse of power. Like the psalmist, we also cry “How long, O Lord?” To quote Habakkuk again (1:1-4),

“O Lord, how long shall I cry for your help, and you will not listen?

Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?

Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?

*Destruction and violence are before me;
Strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack
And justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous—
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.”*

Advent, then, is a time of holy waiting on God’s Reign of Justice and Peace for the whole world. It’s why we read from the prophet Isaiah every Advent and Christmas. Because the longing of the prophets of old, which as Christians we see fulfilled in the coming of Christ, is also our longing in our own time. And we wait with hope for God’s will to be done “on earth, as it is in Heaven.”

“[God] shall judge between the nations,
And shall arbitrate for many peoples;
They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
And their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war any more.” (Is. 2:4)

And in the beloved words from Isaiah Chapter 11:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse
And a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The spirit of counsel and might,

The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
...with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
And decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
...The wolf shall live with the lamb,
The leopard shall lie down with the kid,
The calf and the lion and the fatling together,
And a little child shall lead them...
They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain,
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
As the waters cover the sea.” (Is. 11:1-3, 4, 6, 9)

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We recognize this as poetry, as prophecy, and we know that singlehandedly we cannot bring this about. These are visions of hope that came from a people who were the underdog in society, and who longed for vindication. Too often, we ourselves don't identify much with the underdog, except sentimentally. But the witness of Scripture is that God never loses sight of the poor and those who are treated unjustly. We may not be able to do anything to change their circumstances by ourselves, but we are called as Christians to partner with God, to align ourselves with God's desire for the care of the poor and of the earth, and do what we can—through our actions day by day, big and little. And belonging to a community like Holy Trinity Parish gives us the strength in numbers to accomplish far more together than we could do individually. We already have!

When Mary said “yes” to the Angel, she took a big risk. She knew she was in for a turbulent life, a life filled with uncertainty, great joy, but also great sorrow. But she said “yes” to the Angel, because she was willing to expand her life, expand her soul, and be for others in a new and completely astonishing way.

This is what it means to have a *calling*. A vocation—from the Latin *vocatio*, [to be] called. None of us is called to be *the* Virgin Mary, the God-bearer (*Theotokos*, as she is called in the Orthodox tradition), but all of us in our *own* way *are* called to be God-bearers. Each of us is called by our baptisms: We are called to “seek and serve Christ in other persons.” We are called to be Christ for one another.

Novelist Gail Godwin wrote, “Something’s your vocation if it keeps making more of you.” And the poet Fredrick Buechner also wrote, “Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

We are not asked to be more, to do more, to give more than that. And we are also not asked to be less, do less, give less. Where is the balance point, where we are joyfully giving out of a sense of abundance and the hope of God’s own abundance that never ends, rather than out of a sense of scarcity, and fear that if we don’t do enough, somehow everything will come to ruin? How do we give so that in giving, we receive more joy, not just exhaustion and burnout?

I think—and I’m not always good at this myself—that part of the key to this mystery is never losing sight of who the ultimate Giver is—that God is with us, filling us to overflowing with God’s own love for us at every moment. Joy is not manufactured, but received. It goes back to that dance with which we started the day—we need time for quiet and contemplation, time to be close to God and feel God’s nearness again, time to allow ourselves to know God’s

deep recognition of who each of us truly is, and to know how God loves us extravagantly, beyond all measure. To let ourselves be loved—perhaps, as simple as this sounds, this may be one of the hardest things we ever have to do—and when we let ourselves be loved, love will flow freely from us once again, like a cup of water that naturally overflows when it is filled to the brim and beyond!

So here are some final questions for you to ponder as we enter our final time of silence together:

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION III:

What is your deepest longing or hope for the world today?

How might God be calling you to be a God-bearer in your own life?

What is the work, and what are the relationships in your life that are making more of you? How can you spend more of your time and energy with that work and those relationships?

Where do you think is the place that possibly your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet?

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Scripture passages quoted:

Luke 1:46-56 (the Magnificat)

Habakkuk 1:1-4

Isaiah 2:4

Isaiah 11:1-3, 4, 6, 9

Quotations: Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).
Gail Godwin, *Evensong*, (New York: Ballantine, 1999), p. 12.