



Roanoke, Virginia  
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Third Sunday of Advent

*“Embodied”*

*Luke 1:39-56*

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**Introduction:** (written by Rev. Rachel C. Thompson)

The biblical Elizabeth was a cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Elizabeth, a descendent of Aaron, was married to a priest named Zechariah. Luke doesn't tell us much about either of them except that they were righteous, lived blamelessly, and had no children. Through a miraculous occurrence of events, Elizabeth, in her old age, becomes pregnant with the child who will grow up to be John the Baptist. This miracle comes just before the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her that she, too, has miraculously conceived a child. Our story picks up from there in Luke, chapter 1, verses 39-56.

Luke 1:39-56:

<sup>39</sup> In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'



<sup>46</sup> And Mary said,  
<sup>47</sup> ‘My soul magnifies the Lord,  
<sup>48</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

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

### **Sermon:**

I am drawn to stories of women in scripture. A large part of that is most likely because I am a woman, naturally. But I think a bit of that interest comes from the fact that glimpses of women in scripture are rare. There are 93 women who speak in the Bible, 49 of whom are named. These women speak a total of 14,056 words collectively—roughly 1.1 percent of the total words in all of scripture.<sup>i</sup>

Here in Luke, we have two women who are named, and a passage that is almost all women’s dialogue. And it’s at the start of Jesus’ story. Elizabeth and Mary are cousins. They are two women of lowly stature, at opposite ends of the childbearing age. In most any other circumstance, history would never find it worthwhile to remember their story, let alone their conversation, their song.

In Elizabeth and Mary’s culture, a woman’s primary purpose in life was to bear children. Elizabeth, an older woman, had spent her married life infertile. She had endured her adulthood being treated as a failure. Some of you may remember Hannah in 1 Samuel. She was thought to be barren, and the cruelty she experienced from other women was almost more than she could endure. A woman who didn’t bear children, people assumed, must be being punished by God for something she did or something that is wrong with her.

I feel a particular affinity for women like Elizabeth. We do share a great name. But we also share a membership in that quiet and sometimes lonely club—the one where you pray and pray for a child, and wonder if it will ever be possible for you.



For years, Elizabeth waited and watched families around her grow and grow. At last, in her old age, a miracle. She could finally be seen as an honorable woman, pregnant with her husband's son.

In our passage, you can see she hasn't forgotten where she comes from. She greets her young cousin with honor, overturning social expectation. Mary is an unmarried pregnant woman. She might expect judgment, shame, even ostracism from other women, even her older relative. But Elizabeth remembers her own experience and opens her arms and her home to a young girl her neighbors would expect her to reject. Instead of shaming Mary, she welcomes, blesses, and celebrates her.

*“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup> And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?”*

The pregnancy that might have brought Mary shame brings joy and honor instead. Elizabeth sees beyond the surface to the reality of God's love at work, even among those whom society would have her reject and exclude.

In response, Luke has Mary burst into song. It's not just some pretty tune with lilting lyrics. It is a song of praise, and it is also a song of testimony. She testifies to the subversive nature of a God whose kingdom upends the expectations of our world.

It's a powerful song.

Some songs are powerful.

Theologian David Lose points out that some songs can be so powerful that singing can be an act of resistance. American slaves knew this. When they sang their spirituals in the South, they were both praising God and protesting their masters. Men and women would gather for worship and sing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” To their masters, it sounded like a tune about the prophet Elijah. But to those with ears to really hear it was a song about abolition...

*Swing low* = come into slaveholding states

*Sweet chariot* = the Underground Railroad

*Comin' for to carry me home* = take me to freedom in the North.<sup>ii</sup>

Civil Rights leaders in America remembered the power in song. They sang with defiance songs like “We Shall Overcome,” when many in America didn't give them the chance to advance their cause, let alone triumph.

In 1989, protesters in Leipzig knew this, too. For several months before the fall of the Berlin wall, citizens of Leipzig gathered on Monday nights by candlelight around St. Nikolai church to sing—the very church where Bach composed his cantatas. Within two months, their numbers grew from a little more than a thousand to more than three hundred thousand people—over half the citizens of the city. They sang songs of hope and protest and justice until their songs shook the powers of their nation and changed the world. Later on, when someone asked an officer of the



East German police why they didn't crush these protests like they had so many others, the officer replied, "We had no contingency plan for song."<sup>iii</sup>

Mary and Elizabeth had to understand singing as an act of resistance. They had to recognize how absurd their situation appeared—two women, one too old to bear a child, the other so young she wasn't even married. They probably knew how little account the world would pay them, and how far away they were from any position of power or influence, even living under oppression in a Roman occupied state. But when they were faced with the impossible odds of their situation, they did not retreat, or apologize, or despair. They said, "yes." They sang.

Despite her age and situation in life, Mary recognizes she has a voice, and a voice of value. Her song calls on the psalms and on Hannah's song in the Old Testament. (Mary must have known her scripture well.) She uses her voice to share the news that God is coming in new and life-changing ways, and that the world will never be the same again. She sings of her confidence in the Lord's promise to upend the powers that be, reverse the fortunes of an unjust world, and lift up all those who have been oppressed.

If we look back at our passage, we can see that all the verbs in Mary's song are in the past tense. When Mary sang, she didn't just name those promises, she entered into them. She has already been drawn into relationship with the God of Israel. The past tense doesn't so much signify that everything Mary sings about has been accomplished, but rather that Mary is now included in God's history of redemption.

Mary's song, Mary herself, embodies the hope God brings. We are in a season of waiting. In Advent, we wait for Jesus to come. We know, of course, Jesus has already come—but we remember he will come again. We remember the months Mary spent waiting—three of them with her cousin Elizabeth—and we remember the anticipation she must have felt. We remember the generations of God's people who prayed for a Messiah, a Savior. We remember the promise God kept. We remember that God became one with us—God became one of us.

The Greek church calls Mary *Theotokos*, "God bearer." She held within her flesh and blood body, the body of our Lord. In her small young frame, she felt the kicks and the hiccups of the Son who would feel the waves lap at his feet and rough wood against his bare back. In just a few months more, she would hold a crying child in the place where the animals slept. We wonder if she knew what this child would do, what this child would mean for the world. Right here in her song, I think we can see she had some idea. The way ahead for him meant going against what the world's kingdom would choose. And that way could not be easy.

Earlier in worship, we sang the hymn "My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout." This hymn is a paraphrase of Mary's song.

*From the halls of power to the fortress tower,  
not a stone will be left on stone.  
Let the king beware for your justice tears  
every tyrant from his throne.*



*The hungry poor shall weep no more,  
for the food they can never earn;  
These are tables spread, ev'ry mouth be fed,  
for the world is about to turn....*

*Though the nations rage from age to age,  
we remember who holds us fast:  
God's mercy must deliver us  
from the conqueror's crushing grasp.  
This saving word that our forbears heard  
is the promise that holds us bound,  
'Til the spear and rod be crushed by God,  
who is turning the world around....*

Mary knew the power a song could hold. Singing doesn't just help us to name things, it draws us into the reality we voice. God has promised to change the world, and in singing these promises we enter into that work.

Each year this time, we light Advent candles against the darkness. We boldly proclaim the peace, hope, joy, and love his birth ushers in. In the midst of a world where people both welcome and seethe against the prophecy Mary sings, we retell the stories. We wait and we light candles and we sing.

*<sup>6</sup> O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer  
our spirits by thine advent here;  
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
and death's dark shadows put to flight.  
...*

*<sup>7</sup> O come, Desire of nations, bind  
all peoples in one heart and mind;  
bid envy, strife, and discord cease;  
fill the whole world with heaven's peace.  
...*

So, while we wait, may we be ready. Like Elizabeth, may we be ready to welcome this embodied God with open arms, with open homes. May we be willing to risk the shock of our neighbors, of our culture, when we proclaim a light in the darkness that challenges the status quo. And may we find strength in the company of saints that stretches from Mary and Elizabeth down through the ages to all of us gathered here.



Let us raise our voices in hope and expectation with Christians throughout the centuries—waiting once more for the presence and comfort of the Lord.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bible-women-words\\_n\\_6608282](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bible-women-words_n_6608282)

<sup>ii</sup> [https://bento.cdn.pbs.org/hostedbento-prod/filer\\_public/Underground%20Railroad%20William%20Still/Classroom/Classroom\\_Coded%20Lyrics%20Worksheet%20Teacher%20Notes.pdf](https://bento.cdn.pbs.org/hostedbento-prod/filer_public/Underground%20Railroad%20William%20Still/Classroom/Classroom_Coded%20Lyrics%20Worksheet%20Teacher%20Notes.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Working Preacher, Advent 4C: Singing as an Act of Resistance, David Lose, Dec 14, 2015.

