

December 11, 2022
Third Sunday of Advent, Year A
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Isaiah 35:1-10
Canticle 15 (Luke 1:46-55)
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

Christmas is two weeks away, but Christmas music season has arrived. Yes, even I break the rules and start listening during Advent. I enjoy most Christmas music, but there are a few songs that I just cannot abide, sometimes for the music, sometimes for the lyrics, and sometimes for both.

The song occupying the number one spot on my all-time most-loathed list is “Little Drummer Boy.” Maybe I’m along in that. I have hated that song since I was young enough to be a Little Drummer Tomboy, which is to say, for as long as I can remember. Its droning monotony makes my teeth grind. I have felt that way about every popular artist’s reinterpretation over the years. As I prepared this sermon, I even tried a couple, just to make sure, but I never made it past “Come, they told me.” When we moved to Connecticut, someone placed a “Little Drummer Boy” curse on my head: if we turn on the Christmas radio station, it nearly always starts playing within minutes. “Oh my God, no!” I wail, as Jakki laughs and I lurch to turn it off as quickly as possible.

When it comes to lyrics, I treat much popular Christmas music the same way I treat a lot of church hymnody: I try not to pay too much attention. Still, there is one song that gets my Christmas stable goat: “Mary, Did You Know.” It was popularized several years ago by the group Pentatonix. It offers its own monotony, with about half the lines being just that: “Mary, did you know?” In case you’re unfamiliar with it, I’ll read the first part:

Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Would one day walk on water?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Would save our sons and daughters?

Did you know that your baby boy
Has come to make you new,
This child that you delivered,
will soon deliver you?

If you like this song, I get it. In some ways it’s lovely. And it still annoys me.

Last week my snarky side was perhaps sinfully satisfied by a parody song video that showed up in my social media. It’s a response to “Mary, Did You Know,” and it’s called, “Yes, I Freakin’ Knew.” YouTube says this video was posted a couple of years ago, but it was new to me. The video is a head shot of a woman dressed as Mary—she’s in a white dress with a blue head scarf. To the tune of “Mary, Did You Know,” she sings these lyrics:

Yes, I freakin' knew that my baby boy
would one day walk on water.
Yes, I freakin' knew that my baby boy
would save your sons and daughters.

Did you know that the angel Gabriel
himself gave me the news?
I've known about my kiddo
a lot longer than you.

Yes, I freakin' knew cause I was there
when Gabriel said get ready.
Yes, I freakin' knew cause Gabe said that God
would be my baby daddy.

Did you know that your stupid song
is patronizing dude?
When you mansplain my own pregnancy
you're acting dumb and rude.

Yes, I freakin' knew.[†]

The song goes on a little longer, but you get the point.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. You'll notice that we've stirred some pink into our blue today. Both the third Sunday of Advent and the third Sunday in Lent can be recognized with pink instead of blue or purple. The idea is to provide a little break in the repentance that marks the season of Lent and to a lesser degree the season of Advent.

I generally push back against the gender norms linking pink and femininity. But I make an exception for this Sunday, because the pink reminds me that it's time to think about Mary. Today we heard from Mary with the Magnificat, which we heard in place of the psalm. It's optional, but I choose it every chance I get. There are relatively few important women in the Bible, and fewer still with a voice. We need to hear their voices every time we can.

This year Matthew is the primary source of our gospel readings, as he was today. The Magnificat is from Luke, who has a slightly different agenda. The Magnificat actually begins in the middle of a scene that includes *two* women: Mary, already pregnant with Jesus the Messiah, and her relative Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist. Mary has gone to visit Elizabeth. At their meeting, Elizabeth voices words of honor to Mary, and then Mary voices the Magnificat to Elizabeth.

Have you ever heard of something called the Bechdel Test? It's named after the cartoonist Alison Bechdel, though she has always acknowledged getting the idea from a friend. You might know Alison Bechdel as the author of three graphic memoirs, including *Fun Home*. That book brought her critical and commercial success, and its Broadway adaptation won the Tony Award for Best Musical in 2015.

Bechdel is a lesbian who was known to some of us years before because of her groundbreaking comic "Dykes to Watch Out For." What would become known as the Bechdel Test originated in a strip from 1985. In it, one woman asks another if she wants to go see a movie. The second woman replies with this: "I only go see a movie if it satisfies three basic requirements. One, it has to have two women in it who, two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man."² She goes on to lament how few movies that leaves her to go see.

If we accept that God is in fact not a man, then the story of Mary and Elizabeth passes the Bechdel Test. I racked my brain, and I think it's only because of this story that the Gospel of Luke and even the entire New Testament pass the Bechdel Test.

I realize that the odds of this story being factually true are slim to none. But it's still a fact that in Luke's community the story was told *this* way. It must then be true that Mary was so important—that women were so important—that it's Mary who voices the most powerful summary of Luke's radical gospel and its overturning of the social order. As we now say, representation matters. Therefore, we might also note that Mary and Elizabeth were not just women, but pregnant women with brown skin who were subject to colonization by empire. One of them voices the Magnificat. That is worth claiming and, well, magnifying.

Of course, it's hard not to wonder how that overturning is going. On Tuesday my inbox included a blast email from the Episcopal Public Policy network with this title: "Urge Congress to Support the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act." The Episcopal Public Policy Network is a grassroots network facilitated by the Church's Office of Government Relations, which works on federal legislation and policy on behalf of all of us.³ I clicked the link in that email and read this:

As people of faith, we believe providing protections during pregnancy is essential. Protections during pregnancy help to ensure that those who are in a vulnerable time in their lives are not discriminated against, and to minimize the risk of pre-term birth or miscarriage due to work requirements. Reasonable accommodation will promote better outcomes for babies, mothers and others who give birth, families, and communities. Every pregnant worker should be allowed to earn a living without fearing for the health of their pregnancy, and no pregnant worker should have to choose between their job and their health or that of their child.⁴

As you probably know, the United States lags behind the rest of the wealthy nations when it comes to things like health care for pregnant people and supports for new parents. As in so many other areas, racial disparities persist. For example, the pregnancy-related mortality rate is higher in the United States than any other developed country.⁵ And in the United States, the rate for Black people is three times the rate for white people.⁶

We say that Advent is the season when we anticipate both the first and second coming of our savior. Maybe that's another way of saying that the Kingdom of God has arrived, though not yet in all its fullness. Last week, I started thinking about how, in the Magnificat, Mary says that God, for example, *has* cast down the mighty and *has* lifted up the lowly. My first thought was, You could have fooled me. But then I began to wonder: maybe God sees things differently than we do. For God, the overturning has already happened. We are the ones who need to get on board.

Last week I phoned my predecessor as rector, Michael Ray. I wanted to offer a personal invitation to attend the 175th anniversary concert now scheduled for January 29. I'd also been wanting to thank him for all he did to make St. Thomas's a leader on LGBTQ+ issues in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut. So I did that, too, while lamenting that there are still many Episcopal churches in the state that are not yet fully affirming. With more eloquence than I'm able to offer, he talked about that already but not-yet Kingdom of God. He said he used to get very impatient with the waiting for it. But then he realized that he glimpsed the Kingdom of God every time the congregation gathered around the communion table. I know exactly what he means.

I do feel a connection to Mary. Some might say that's because I grew up Roman Catholic. But I don't think so. The Mary of my Roman Catholic childhood was a Mary whose only activity seemed to be suffering. I get the appeal of that suffering Mary, the one who is with you no matter how bad things get. Maybe she's the Mary of "Mary, Did You Know?" But, the thing is, Mary didn't *only* suffer, and maybe that's why that song annoys me so much. There's another Mary, the Mary of the Magnificat, the Mary of "Yes, I Freakin' Knew," the Mary I'll call the fighting Mary. And, you know, she is also with us no matter how bad things get.

Today we're hearing the Magnificat twice: we heard it from the choir; at the end of the service, we'll all sing a hymnodized version. I asked Noah to make it our recessional hymn, our hymn for bringing the mission of the church out into the world. That version, "Tell Out My Soul," is one of my favorite hymns. I wish a popular artist would record it so it would get on the radio. It would be a worthy replacement for "Little Drummer Boy." In the meantime, this is my plan: when I hear "Little Drummer Boy," I'll sing "Tell Out My Soul." And I'll think of Mary, literally and figuratively pregnant with possibility. With the Magnificat, with Advent, we are invited into her pregnancy, that liminal space from which our own delivery has already been birthed.

Notes

¹ The video of the song “Mother Mary Responds to ‘Mary Did You Know,’” with lyrics by Cindy Sadler and performance by Charissa Memrick, is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqLz8nGdOn4> (accessed December 11, 2022).

² For the original strip, see Walker Caplan, “Read the 1985 Strip That Inspired the Bechdel Test,” LitHub, September 13, 2021, available online at <https://lithub.com/read-the-1985-comic-strip-that-inspired-the-bechdel-test/> (accessed December 11, 2022).

³ The website for the Episcopal Public Policy Network is at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/office-government-relations/eppn-sign-up/> (accessed December 11, 2022). The website for the Episcopal Church Office of Government Relations is at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/office-government-relations/> (accessed December 11, 2022).

⁴ Episcopal Public Policy Network, “Urge Congress to Support the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act,” available online at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/office-government-relations/action-alerts/?vsrc=%2fCampaigns%2f91593%2fRespond> (accessed December 11, 2022).

⁵ See, for example, “Maternal Mortality and Maternity Care in the United States Compared to 10 Other Developed Countries,” The Commonwealth Fund, November 18, 2020, available online at <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2020/nov/maternal-mortality-maternity-care-us-compared-10-countries> (accessed December 11, 2022).

⁶ See, for example, Latoya Hill, Samantha Artiga, and Usha Ranji, “Racial Disparities in Maternal and Infant Health: Current Status and Efforts to Address Them,” Kaiser Family Foundation, November 1, 2022, available online at <https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/racial-disparities-in-maternal-and-infant-health-current-status-and-efforts-to-address-them/#:~:text=Black%20and%20AIAN%20women%20have,disparities%20increase%20by%20maternal%20age> (accessed December 11, 2022).