

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven
December 22, 2024

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever." ~Luke 1:39-5

I've lived in New Haven four times now and one of the things I love most about New Haven is shopping local. You think of the wealth of unique finds here, whether it's in the stores or whether it's in the art galleries or whether it's the food. It's just extraordinary. And so each time I've lived here, I've I've made sure I shopped local. In fact, one of the times I lived here was when Orange Street still had a hardware store and a pharmacy and one could do almost all of one's shopping right here in the neighborhood. And so when I left New Haven the most recent time, I decided to shop local with my moving company and I found a a really compelling one. The owner had launched his company with the beautiful idea to hire only young people who had run into trouble with the law, who had a criminal record, and, most critically, who had decided to leave that life behind them and in part to accomplish that through this job. And so I hired them and they were by far the best moving team I ever had.

The team member that I got to know the best was a gentle, tall young man who stayed behind in the in the apartment and was doing some of the finer work. His name was Sean, and we talked quite a bit. He told me about the woman who had rescued him and who had set him on a better path. Her name is Mary and she and her husband have a house on Whalley Avenue right near Edge of the Woods. They've had a whole series of young people whom they've welcomed into their house; who needed rescue and for whom they've provided it with the understanding that if they slide back into their older life, they're not able to stay, out of concern for the others in the house. But other than that, they are always certain of 100% support. Sean said that of course he would never have violated that. He was indebted to Mary and it's the least he could have done. Most movingly, over the course of our time together, he was able to tell me about Mary and and just how her fierce love for him and for all of those in the house gave them something that in her dedication and love allowed them to find their way back.

As Sean and I continued to talk, at one point I asked him, "Where do you think Mary gets it? Where do you think she gets this strength, the ability to provide all of that for so many?" And Sean thought about it for a second, paused, and then finally said, "Well, I can tell you what *she* says. She says her parents named her name Mary, and that there's no greater honor than being given that name, and that she's just trying to live up to it." Before the day ended, I told Sean that I often shopped local at Edge of the Woods and so he said "Hey, do you mind?" as he took my phone and entered Mary's number. And he said, "You know, if you're ever in the neighborhood give us a call." I never did, but I am intrigued, and I'm intrigued for all sorts of reasons, but in particular, I'm always intrigued to hear of those who in keeping with innumerable souls over two millennia have found their strength, their inspiration, their connectedness to God through Mary. It surprised me when I first learned that for at least one thousand of our two thousand years as a faith, it was Mary who gave people that sense of companionship, of steadfastness, that so many of us now find in Jesus. When bible stories were translated into local languages during the time of Reformation, folks came to know Jesus in all his human fullness. But until that time Jesus was seen as a rather lofty figure, the exalted Christos, and it was *Mary* one had as companion along the way to walk with and to pray with.

That's always intrigued me, and of course yes, I've always been intrigued by the sheer number of people who have been given her name, who have been brought through *the giving of name* into her realm. I've always been intrigued by those who've found such hope and strength in her. Most of all I've been intrigued by passages such as the one we behold today, where we see her close up. Scripture doesn't give us many stories of Mary, just a precious handful, and this vignette is among the richest. What do we see in it? Of all those qualities traditionally ascribed to Mary, the one we see here is the one that underlies and connects those other qualities. What we see here so vividly is a *laser-beam focus*; precisely that focus we seek, nourish and cultivate throughout the Advent season, which comes to its climax today on its fourth and final Sunday. The season culminates in Mary, who somehow is able to stay focused in an ultimate way on all that really matters. *Watch*, the gospel said on the season's first Sunday, *attend, wake up!* Focus like a laser beam on God and on God's kingdom. *Await the One who comes*, John the Baptist urged, pointing away from self and toward Jesus with his own laser-beam focus. *He has come*, Mary proclaims today in radiant song as she somehow manages to make an arduous, 100-mile trip to be with her kinswoman, Elizabeth. Elizabeth needed her, and Mary got herself there. We all know this is among the life lessons we can't learn enough: *Be there*. And and yet we come up short at times. I remember when my

mother died and my siblings and I were all walking in the dark. On the day of her memorial service, as the church filled, we saw folks whom we expected to see alongside some who were a wonderful surprise, including an older man, a longtime friend of the family who should not have been able to be there, and as I learned from his doctors, really shouldn't have gotten himself there. But he did. He got himself out of his hospital bed, got himself into his car, drove for what turned out to be the last time in his own life to be able to be there, to pay homage to an old friend, but most of all to bear this with us, to be able to give us that gift of presence.

Mary got herself there and moreover we see in Elisabeth's words that yes, Mary's faithfulness, her laser-beam focus on God, equipped her to silence the noise of distraction and fulfill her call from God: understandable noise when in her culture, in her time, she could have paid the price of her own life for making the choice that she made to bear a child out of wedlock. She could have been stoned to death. Yet somehow Mary was able to silence the noise of distraction and see beyond: to see that this was a call from God in the course of the unfolding of God's love story with God's people, the story of salvation, the story of restoration, the story of reconciliation.

She proclaims her call, her conviction and her joy in shockingly raw terms, in rebellious terms, in subversive terms, in terms that again could have put her in great danger. She uttered those words, known eternally as her *Magnificat*, anyway; words of such power that, as I learned recently, they were banned by the church of England at its colonial peak in India because the church worried that Mary's words would *give the people too much hope*. Mary proclaimed her famous words because she understood herself as a prophet, yes, of hope, in that long line of God's messengers that were her heritage, bearing God's word to a broken and expectant world, to a world groaning in its own longing for release, for redemption. Mary silenced the noise to offer a word of God to the world.

And so yes, how wonderful to know that that prophetic word, that vision of love, mercy, truth and reconciliation all in all, of valleys raised and mountains brought low, has been handed from Mary of Nazareth to another Mary who claims her as companion on the way: Mary of New Haven, one might say; Mary of Whalley Avenue; Mary who proclaims with laser-beam focus in her own time the call to make peace, serve truth, to do justice. I still have her number in my phone. I'd love to go and meet her. For now, thanks be to God for Mary, and for Mary named for Mary; for all who bear Mary, her clarity, her vision, and her truth to the world: *He is come! Justice is real, mercy is now, hope is fulfilled! Joy to the world!*