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Advent 4

**Micah 5:1-4, Hebrews 10:5-10,
Luke 1:39-45**

Micah 6 offers what we can give the Christ Child. Try it. A magnificat was not available in the song book so I included it here. Just note that no baby is mentioned.

Luke 1:39–55

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 fulfilment 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."

This leaves us with the knowledge that Jesus acted out this prayer of his Mother. the Magnificat and consider how it's a psalm of challenge, of

resistance and of hope for a changed order

Reflection

The throw-away references to Mary crossing the hill country of Judea 'with haste' has often been explained as an indication of Mary's excitement to visit her cousin. However, as was explored in the third week of Advent, Luke's gospel unfolds on an extraordinarily political and militaristic landscape. There are soldiers and tetrarchs and territories everywhere — no wonder Luke has Mary crossing the country at speed.

I cannot think of Mary without thinking of a story of gathering in peace amidst tensions and complications. I spent a day with a group of Jews and Muslims in story-league. They meet monthly, taking time to speak, to hear, to listen, to understand, to get to know each other, to tell difficult stories, to ask difficult questions, to work hard to disagree well. They have an interest in reconciliation and being witnesses to religious diversity across traditions sometimes fractured in relationships. We gathered in a room at the top of a building. Initially, at the beginning of the day, we shared introductions, followed by reflecting on the story of the group — hearing why the group had met, what keeps them meeting, and what keeps them coming back. This group represent the tensions and pains of our world. The group had taken painful pilgrimages — often against their will — to bear witness to their hope. Somebody comes from a region torn apart by violent conflict; somebody lives with an injury after a bomb; somebody's family rejects their interfaith engagements. Somebody said they are lonely, somebody invited them to an evening out. Somebody says "I have more problems with the tensions within my own religion than I do with the tensions between people of different religions". Everybody laughed. Bread was broken. Pain was shared. Glad and generous hearts. We met for a full day. As we came close to lunch, someone went to a kitchen to make rice to accompany the curry. While they were doing that, some of the Muslims prepared a space in the room to pray. They invited anyone who wished to join them, and so, while Muslim friends praised the greatness of God — prayer mats facing in the same direction — others sat quietly in meditation or prayer or reflection. Someone was preparing a table for food while the only noises were ancient

prayers, the rustle of clothes as people bowed, the sound of breathing.

Over lunch, we spoke of Mary, as it was a feast day of Mary in the Christian calendar. Someone asked me what the text was and we discussed that. Somebody else said "Do you know that Mary has a full Surah about her in the Qu'ran? ... Would you like to hear it?" Everyone was quiet. She said "I can remember it." Everybody stopped eating. She recited the Surah, by memory, by heart.

Mary is a being described as the figure upon whom a religious tradition turns. The theologian Yves Congar refers to Mary is both "the final figure of Old Testament History" and notes that she is the "the original cell of the new creation in Christ by which all humanity share in the glory of God in a new, graced way." Luke is choosing to describe the central turning point of salvation history through the story of two women — one young and one old — living under the compromising circumstances of a country caught up in the conflict of empire.

In the Qur'an no other woman is given as much attention as Mary; indeed the 19th Chapter of the Qur'an is named after her, and of the 114 Surahs, Mary is one of eight people who has a Surah named after her. The sacred text from the Qur'an — as sung by the woman in London — moved the group immensely.

In the gospel of Luke, Mary is at once a person of extraordinary character and a person caught up in the ordinary things of life under occupation. Karl Rahner says that Mary's life, in the midst of the complications, poverty and sorrow it contained, gives us the courage to recognise that holiness is not so heavenly and ethereal, but is ordinary, and this helps us to see that the Ordinary Everyday can be the seat of grace in our lives.

Mary's life — like many lives — exists between the dynamics of faith and conflict. Affected by the empire of the time, Mary's vision is beyond time — holding an old story and a new one in her person. Luke peppers the text with references to Mary that indicate the unique place she occupies in time and Christian Theology. Mary's journey across the hill country, and her arrival at her cousin's house are narrated in ways that portray her as the Ark of the Covenant. Compare the following texts:
"And why is this granted me, *that the mother of my Lord should come to me* (Luke 1:43).

"[David] said, 'How can the ark of the Lord come to me' (2 Sam 6:9).

"For behold... the babe in my womb leaped" (Luke 1:44).

"Michal . . . looked out the window and saw David leaping" (2 Sam 6:16).

"And Mary remained with her about three months" (Luke 1:56).

"And the ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obededom the Gittite three months" (2 Sam 6:11).

What is it that Mary represents for Christian theology? She is the person held between received stories and emerging ones. In her — like in that brave community of friends meeting across traditions — stories meet and are held together in an integrity that calls for justice and resolution. In the ordinariness, bravery, suffering and determination of her life, we see God's saving action in a story arcing towards beatitude.

STORY:

The man to whom I'm going to introduce you was not a scrooge, he was a kind, decent, mostly good man. Generous to his family, upright in his dealings with other men. But he just didn't believe all that incarnation stuff which the churches proclaim at Christmas Time. It just didn't make sense and he was too honest to pretend otherwise. He just couldn't swallow the Jesus Story, about God coming to Earth as a man. "I'm truly sorry to distress you," he told his wife, "but I'm not going with you to church this Christmas Eve." He said he'd feel like a hypocrite. That he'd much rather just stay at home, but that he would wait up for them. And so he stayed and they went to the midnight service.

Shortly after the family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. He went to the window to watch the flurries getting heavier and heavier and then went back to his fireside chair and began to read his newspaper. Minutes later he

was startled by a thudding sound. Then another, and then another. Sort of a thump or a thud. At first he thought someone must be throwing snowballs against his living room window. But when he went to the front door to investigate he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They'd been caught in the storm and, in a desperate search for shelter, had tried to fly through his large landscape window.

Well, he couldn't let the poor creatures lie there and freeze, so he remembered the barn where his children stabled their pony. That would provide a warm shelter, if he could direct the birds to it. Quickly he put on a coat, galoshes, tramped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the doors wide and turned on a light, but the birds did not come in. He figured food would entice them in. So he hurried back to the house, fetched bread crumbs, sprinkled them on the snow, making a trail to the yellow-lighted wide open doorway of the stable. But to his dismay, the birds ignored the bread crumbs, and continued to flap around helplessly in the snow. He tried catching them. He tried shoing them into the barn by walking around them waving his arms. Instead, they scattered in every direction, except into the warm, lighted barn.

And then, he realized, that they were afraid of him. To them, he reasoned, I am a strange and terrifying creature. If only I could think of some way to let them know that they can trust me. That I am not trying to hurt them, but to help them. But how? Because any move he made tended to

frighten them, confuse them. They just would not follow. They would not be led or shoed because they feared him. "If only I could be a bird," he thought to himself, "and mingle with them and speak their language. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to safe, warm . . . to the safe warm barn. But I would have to be one of them so they could see, and hear and understand."

At that moment the church bells began to ring. The sound reached his ears above the sounds of the wind. And he stood there listening to the bells--"Adeste Fidelis"--listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas. And he sank to his knees in the snow.

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Blessings to You and Yours.

Please remember that with Christmas comes traveling and some of the regular church volunteers are away. **Check to see that all the Worship needs are met: ushers, greeters, Communion Servers, Readers.**

Thanks, enjoy the time with family and friends, be blessed.