**Radical Hope**

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*Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, Luke 1:46-55*

It’s been a year of new life here at Nutana Park Mennonite Church. Many of the young families have welcomed new babies into their midst, and the rest of us bring them casseroles and cuddle their babies after worship and generally rejoice with them at these new little beings. It’s a gift for a church community to be able to welcome new life into its midst in this way – and as I’m viscerally, sometimes uncomfortably aware of in my very bones, we have a few more babies on the horizon as well! As we’ve been exploring in our Adult Education class, there is something about birth and new life that gives us profound hope for the world, that seems to us like a fresh start, an opportunity to begin again and change things for the better.

Of course, as Christians, we have a whole season of the church year that we dedicate to this idea and its reality. Advent is a sacred time when we collectively wait for a child to be born – when we are all pregnant with the hope that the coming of the Christ-child brings. Because Advent has been so idealized, it can seem quite distant from our reality. As a result, we can forget that in many ways, Mary’s pregnancy was much like other pregnancies or adoption processes. Every child comes after a time of waiting and hoping, a time of embracing the unknown, a time of risking unseen changes to one’s entire world. As our family excitedly prepares to welcome our second child, I’m especially aware of how vast an undertaking this is. We know a bit of what we’re getting into this time around, though of course, this will be an entirely different person, and will bring about an entirely different reality of who we are as a family. This baby will change our world – and positively affect the rest of the world, too, we hope.

Our Scripture passages for today certainly speak to this sense of hope, and do so in perhaps surprisingly similar ways. Isaiah 61 and Luke 1 are both songs of rejoicing in God’s salvation or deliverance, but they come from very different eras and circumstances in the history of the Israelite people. The prophet Isaiah was writing to the Israelites who were languishing in exile in Babylon, who had been forcibly taken from their homes and made to live in a strange land. Imagine the hope that these words would have rekindled in them, as Isaiah declared that God was about to deliver them from the suffering and injustice of exile! He says:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
    because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
    to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
    and release to the prisoners;  
2to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,  
    and the day of vengeance of our God;  
    to comfort all who mourn;  
3to provide for those who mourn in Zion—  
    to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
    the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
    the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.  
4They shall build up the ancient ruins,  
    they shall raise up the former devastations;  
they shall repair the ruined cities,  
    the devastations of many generations. (Isaiah 61:1-4, NRSV).

What an inspiring vision! Isaiah speaks here of the direct reversal of their present sorrows, using a series of poignant images – the oppressed receiving good news, prisoners being released, those who mourn being anointed with “the oil of gladness,” the rebuilding of ruins. These grave injustices – “the robbery and wrongdoing” that God “hates” – will be made right by the God who “loves justice” (v. 8). What has felt to the Israelites like a curse or a punishment from God will be turned to a blessing: “all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed” (v. 9b).

And Isaiah is so sure of this impending blessing, that he goes ahead and starts thanking God for it – before it has even happened! You might recognize this rhetorical move from the Psalms, where the writers also sometimes thank God in advance for saving them. There seems to be a clear tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures of counting chickens before they’ve hatched. Talk about radical hope! In Isaiah 61, this shift happens in verse 10, when he declares,

10I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,  
    my whole being shall exult in my God;  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
    he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,  
    and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.  
11For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
    and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise  
    to spring up before all the nations. (Isa. 61:10-11)

Here again, the imagery is vivid, with salvation described as beautiful clothing, fit for a wedding (“the garments of salvation,” “the robe of righteousness,” like the “garland” of a bridegroom and the “jewels” of a bride), and as the new life of a garden, sprouting and springing up, with hopeful little shoots of green rising from the bare earth. This is hope, for Isaiah – the beautiful celebration of love and the sprouting of a garden: the new life that God has promised coming to be, manifesting in our lives, ordinary yet miraculous.

Our second Scripture passage for today expresses a substantially similar sentiment, which we may find a bit surprising, given who speaks these words. These are Mary of Nazareth’s words – or rather, her song of praise – spoken after her cousin Elizabeth has greeted her with a blessing, saying, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb,” and calling her “the mother of my Lord.” Catholic theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson interprets Elizabeth’s words and Mary’s subsequent song this way:

Here is a rare glimpse of female reproductive power as both physically nurturing and politically revolutionary. . . . A pregnant woman is not the usual image that comes to mind when one thinks of a prophet, yet here are two such spirit-filled pregnant prophets crying out in joy, warning, and hope for the future. Clearly this is a picture of Mary that is the complete opposite of the passive, humble handmaid of the patriarchal imagination.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I think Johnson is right – we tend to think that pregnancy and prophecy are a strange combination, and ask what Mary is doing singing these words. In fact, for a long time, church tradition essentially ignored the Magnificat, because it didn’t know what to do with it – and thereby, we silenced Mary, reducing her to the “passive, humble handmaid” rather than the pregnant prophet she is in the Bible.

So what is it exactly about her hymn that leaves us so unsettled? Well, like Isaiah, Mary sings here of the radical – even revolutionary! – overturning of things as they currently are. She seems to be aware from the very beginning of her pregnancy that her child will bring about not only a personal change in her life, as profound as that is, but political and social and all kinds of change. Her child will quite literally change the world. She speaks of how “the Mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is [God’s] name. [God’s] mercy is for those who fear [God] from generation to generation. [God] has shown strength with [God’s] arm; [God] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. [God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; [God] has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. [God] has helped [God’s] servant Israel, in remembrance of [God’s] mercy, according to the promise [God] made to our ancestors…” (Luke 1:49-54). Mary’s song subverts our expectations as this pregnant woman sings of things that we don’t normally associate with pregnancy and mothering: she uses battle imagery (God has shown strength with God’s arm), and speaks of political revolution and liberation (God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly), social justice and economic redistribution (filling the hungry with good things, sending the rich away empty), prophetic fulfillment (according to the promise God made to our ancestors). This is no sweet lullaby on Mary’s lips – and Mary meek and mild is nowhere to be found here! Instead, Mary sings her prophetic recognition that “This child will change everything. . . . This child has already changed everything.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This child will bring about the end of the world as it currently is, and the beginning of a new one. And for those of us who are pretty comfortable with the world as it currently is, this can seem disconcerting.

Priest and chaplain Alice Connor explains it this way:

Mary is more complex than we remember, more challenging than we might expect…. When we read the Magnificat in church, I’m startled each time by how difficult it is. She speaks the good news that the lowly will be lifted up, the lofty will be brought low, and the rich sent away empty, which sometimes doesn’t sound like good news to me. It sounds like a threat. . . . It’s easier to put God and people like Mary into calmer, more quietly loving boxes, so we don’t have to deal with the change they call for. But Mary breaks out of that box and tells us lovingly but firmly, ‘No, darlin’. This is not how we do things. She is a prophet, bearing God’s difficult but good Word to the world.[[3]](#footnote-3)

And just like her fellow-prophet, Isaiah, it’s striking to notice Mary’s verb tenses throughout her song. She sings as if all of these things have already come to pass, as if God has already done great things for her, as if the proud have already been scattered, the powerful have already been overthrown, the hungry have already been filled, the rich already banished – in short, as if God has already fulfilled these promises. It’s as if her hopes for her unborn, just-barely-conceived child are so close she can taste them. It is as if her hopes are already embodied, already encountered in Elizabeth’s confirmation that what is happening to them is of God. Talk about radical hope.

Of course, from our vantage point 2000 years later, we know that Mary’s hopes for her child were fulfilled. We know, for instance, that her son inaugurated his ministry with the words of Isaiah 61, bringing “good news” to the oppressed. We know that he transformed the world through proclaiming and exemplifying the way of God’s justice and peace. And given the content of Mary’s song, it makes sense to think that he learned these things first from her prophetic words and example, as children tend to learn from their parents and other important adults in their lives. The fulfillment of Mary’s hope, then, was something she herself had a hand in bringing about. Her hope was fulfilled in part because she taught her son well. And this, too, goes against our assumptions about hope, which we tend to see as passive waiting. But what if hope requires something of us? What if God calls us to be part of the fulfillment of our hopes and God’s hopes for the world?

Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas says that this is precisely what Advent is all about. She says, “So here’s the thing that Advent reminds us of: that God is always coming toward us. God never turns God’s back on us. … We’re called to move toward God…. God is coming toward us always in movements toward justice and we move toward God by joining God in the movements toward justice … which always are the perfect reflections of God’s love.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

So as we move into this last week of Advent, I invite us to look for ways in which we can join God in such “movements toward justice” in our time and place, and thereby embody and manifest our hope for a new and renewed world. How can we live into Isaiah’s vision of good news for the oppressed, liberation for the captives, and comfort for those who mourn? How can we make Mary’s hopes for the lifting up of the lowly, the filling of the hungry with good things, and God’s blessing of the “nobodies” like her a reality? What might we add to this list from our context today? Maybe hope for a world in which our environment is cherished rather than destroyed for profit, a world in which abuse and violence are no longer ubiquitous (as the #metoo campaign on social media has highlighted), a world in which peace and diversity rather than racism and white supremacy thrive. Perhaps most importantly, would we add hope that our words and actions will provide a prophetic example to the children in our lives, encouraging them to also take up the task of radical hope for God’s justice and peace? Like Isaiah and Mary and Jesus before us, let us be grateful for this new, hopeful world, at the new life which is both on its way and already here among us. AMEN

1. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Alice Connor, *Fierce: Women of the Bible and Their Stories of Violence, Mercy, Bravery, Wisdom, Sex, and Salvation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017), 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Connor, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kelly Brown Douglas, “The God that Is Coming” (video), <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/the-god-that-is-coming> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)