

# APPRECIATING OUR ROOTS

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December 15, 2019

Advent 3

[Isaiah 35:1-10](#)

[Luke 1:46-55](#)

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Video: "[Mary Did You Know?](#)"

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I've always enjoyed that song. And that is a wonderfully creative video.

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Humorous online comments about this song:

- yes, she knew: Gabriel told her.
- man-splaining Jesus to his mother;

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Kidding aside.

I still find it a meaningful invitation to consider the impact of Christmas beyond the day of Jesus' birth.

Christmas is only part of a much larger story -- that both predates and follows Jesus' first breaths.

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After Moses lead the Israelite people away from slavery in Egypt and to the land which Jacob's family had left centuries earlier, in the first years after settling in the land of Canaan, the tribes of Israel were governed - *not by a distant empire or a monarchy or ruling class* - but by a covenant relationship with their god centered on a series of commandments and faithful expectations interpreted by wise local judges.

The Torah (the law) was their king.

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In that time of the judges (as we can read in the early chapters of the old testament book of [First Samuel](#)) lived a woman named Hannah.

Hannah was one of two wives married to Elkanah. Her sister wife, Peninnah, had children; Hannah did not.

When Elkanah provided for the two parts of his family, he gave a disproportionate amount to Hannah. The text doesn't imply that he short-changed Peninnah and her children, but that he gave Hannah more than he would have been obligated to. He did this out of love and honest affection.

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Even so, Hannah was a woman of her time, which (sadly) judged the worthiness of a woman's life on her ability to bear children. In spite of assurances that her husband did not look at her this way, Hannah bought into her cultural expectations. It didn't help that her sister wife ridiculed Hannah for her barrenness.

This situation tore at the soul of Hannah; she prayed to be *like other women*.

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After many years of *trying*, when Hannah did eventually become pregnant, she viewed it as nothing short of a miracle. In her heart, this was the answer to her deepest prayers: she named her son: *Samuel* (God listens).

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Hannah viewed her son as a gift from God, she believed Samuel was destined to serve God.

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When he was old enough, she sent him to live and work with Eli the priest.

It must have been a bitter sweet moment for the unexpected mother to give her child this sacred opportunity. Even so, appreciating the big picture, Hannah sang:

*My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. ... Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. ... The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour.*

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Fast forward several centuries and another woman (unexpectedly expecting) also sings: echoing her ancestor in the faith.

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.*

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According to the gospel of Luke (which records for us Mary's version of the Song of Hannah), she sings these words in response to a mystical experience with a messenger of God.

The angel Gabriel told Mary that her cousin, Elizabeth, (like Hannah and Sarah of old) had become pregnant even though she had never been able to have children. The angel professes that this was indicative that *nothing [is] impossible with God*. This was Gabriel's response to Mary's skepticism that she (who was not yet having sex with anyone at that point in her life) *will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end*. Nothing is impossible with God.

Inspired by this *promise*, Mary sings her humble song which was read today.

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God is overflowing Mary's soul.

Mary accepts that (through her) God is exposing God's-self to the world.

*My soul magnifies the Lord!*

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In both the Aramaic/Hebrew that Mary would have spoken and in the Greek text of the new testament, the word behind *soul* in this passage can also be translated as *life*.

Mary's proclamation (that begins her song) is that her God is being focused through her life. In Mary's life, God is being made easier to see; she is like a magnifying glass for God. In her living, a light is exposing the presence of God in the world!

Out of the *promise* (that nothing is impossible with God) Mary's life magnified the Lord.

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Many years earlier, the prophet Isaiah also shared a promise to bring focus to God's compassion for the people.

As we have heard over these first three weeks of Advent, into the context of expanding empires, this prophet believes that fear is not the end of the story -- a promise for a re-ordering of life is still to come: one where nations learn war no more; one where peace feels like a time when wolves and

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lambs are living together; one where deserts blossom and feeble knees are made firm.

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These were joyful words in a context when *fear* might be a more natural reaction.

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The literal descriptions of Isaiah do not seem possible (no knowledge of war, predatory instincts abated, flowers in waterless lands). But that does not need to stop us from hearing the promise that they point to... that we don't have to assume that fear is our natural state.

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Believe me, I know how paralyzing fear can be!

I know how hard it is to see beyond today's problems and worries.

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As I mentioned in the announcement time at the start of this service, on Saturday this week, the church is offering a special Christmas season service that does not gloss over the problems and worries of today. A so-called *Blue Christmas* service admits that resounding joy only *appears* to dominate this time of long, dark nights. The truth is that (for some of us) joy can be hard to come by regardless of the promises in the Christmas carols.

I have always preferred to plan such services around the timing of the winter solstice: when in our part of the world, darkness dominates and light is at its minimum.

Besides the fact that early Christians subversively hide their celebrations of Jesus' birth under the cover of the wider society's solstice commemorations, there is meaningful symbolism in acknowledging that the darkness that has been steadily growing around us does promise to turn around.

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If there is one thing that I hear in today's readings is that - even in our worst and most worrisome times - to work very hard at not allowing the promise of God's presence to drift completely out of our consciousness. And... to allow ourselves to appreciate even small hopes and hints of emerging joy.

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In this season of advent, the light of Joy is complimented by the lights that are already illuminating our journey towards Bethlehem. Joy travels along side hope and peace.

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What did Mary know?

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How or why she would become Jesus' mother? Not according to Luke. The angel explains that.

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Mary saw herself in the long line of faithful women who - from generation to generation - (believed and then) experienced that *nothing is impossible with God*. The preposition in that phrase is significant. It does not say, *nothing is impossible for God, but with God*. Para (παρά) in Greek means nearby, or beside. Para means *with* as in *along side*.

Gabriel told Mary that *when we set ourselves in God's company, the possibilities are endless*.

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Like Hannah, Mary rejoiced in God: who is not blinded by status or wealth, but sees favourably into the low and forgotten places.

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What do we know?

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That, the light of joy is a bright reminder that we are in good company with God.

That God has a preference for people to be on equal footing. God favours lifting the lowly over adding to the surpluses of those who already have more than they need.

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Mary sang of good news for the poor, just like her unborn child will one day quote Isaiah's words:

*The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor and to set free those who are captive and oppressed.*

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Mary may not have known that when the heaven messenger visited her...  
but she was open to the possibility.

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We are called to shine light into this world to make that dream of Mary not only possible, but real.

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Let us pray:

God of all possibilities, guide us to spread joy in Jesus' name. Amen.

#134MV "There Was a Child"