

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, December 20, 2015)

Texts:

Luke 1:39-55 (*NRSV*)

Within a few days Mary set out and hurried to the hill country to a town of Judah, where she entered Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth.

As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why am I so favored, that the mother of the Messiah should come to me? The moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who believed that what our God said to her would be accomplished!"

Mary said:

"My soul proclaims your greatness, O God,
and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.

For you have looked with favor
upon your lowly servant,
and from this day forward
all generations will call me blessed.

For you, the Almighty, have done great things for me,
and holy is your Name.

Your mercy reaches from age to age
for those who fear you.

You have shown strength with your arm;
you have scattered the proud in their conceit;
you have deposed the mighty from their thrones
and raised the lowly to high places.

You have filled the hungry with good things,
while you have sent the rich away empty.

You have come to the aid of Israel your servant,
mindful of your mercy—

the promise you made to our ancestors—
to Sarah and Abraham
and their descendants forever."

Reflections by Pastor Donald: “Singing Mary’s Song”

These are days, I don’t think I need to tell you, when it can be difficult to be hopeful. In this season of Advent I’ve found myself drawn to this word HOPE and shouldn’t have been surprised that Rev. Lorraine was also drawn to reflect on that four letter word as well as she spoke so eloquently to us, setting the tone for the season on that 1st Sunday of Advent back in November.

As we come to this last Sunday of Advent and our celebration of Christmas Sunday, the culmination of our hope as the Christ Spirit is born anew in our hearts, our lives and our world, I couldn’t help but think about how hope must be born again and again within our hearts, within our lives and within our world if we are to continue anew. Finding ways to assert what is right and beautiful and true is as important if not more important than making sure everybody knows how devastated we are by the evils in the world and reaffirming again and again the ways in which things are so messed up and seem to be getting worse and worse. I truly believe that these statements and this kind of despairing, negative attitude towards life affects and infects our consciousness and actually promotes and encourages the evil in the world as we concentrate our attention on what’s wrong instead of what’s right.

As I’ve said many times before, this does not mean we are called to put on rose-colored glasses or deny the presence of evil and hatred and degradation in the world and in our own environment, but it does mean that we devote ourselves to a daily practice of building up instead of tearing down and of recognizing that God is in and through and part of everything that exists and is more powerful than any Darth Vader darkness asserting itself throughout our existence.

“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things,” Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians, that community of Christians who formed the first church Paul founded in Europe. From the very beginning of the church, and during a time when there was much about which to be afraid, the exhortation is to think on those things that give us life and spirit and positivity instead of on all those things that bring us and the world down and crave our attention and our energy.

This spirit, I think, is exemplified and purified in the song that Mary sings and was read so beautifully for us today by Rev. Lorraine. “My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior,” she sings. “Your mercy reaches from age to age...!”

Here is a young woman with every reason to be scared, thrust into a situation she would never have chosen for herself, but knowing through the angel’s visitation and the gift of her spirit, that this was a moment to be joyous and to bless her God and her Savior. “Blessed is she who believed that what our God said to her would be accomplished!” her cousin Elizabeth says to her and, indeed, this is the faith we must all employ when God provides us with the hope of a better life, a better world, a better way to think and be in all of our existence.

“you have scattered the proud in their conceit;
you have deposed the mighty from their thrones
and raised the lowly to high places.
You have filled the hungry with good things,
while you have sent the rich away empty.”

Mary knows in her heart that the child in her womb for whom there will be no room is coming to turn the world upside down. This child, conceived by God, will dwell in the hearts of all who will receive Him and make that which the world counts as valuable to be as dust and that which God counts as valuable to be as gold.

As Barbara Brown Taylor says in her book, "Home by Another Way," "[Mary sings] for every son and daughter who thought God has forgotten the promise to be with them forever, to love them forever, to give them fresh and endless life."

Part of why we come to church, I hope, is to encourage one another, to be there for one another, to hold the hope and the faith for one another as we go through the changes and challenges of life as well as the hopeful and joyful times of life. Here in our text today we see this beautiful and bountiful relationship as Mary runs to see her much older cousin Elizabeth, also blessed by God with a child she literally couldn't have conceived of who will prepare the way for the child in Mary's womb.

Seeing God in each other's eyes as well as feeling the very human expression of God within their bodies, each woman is filled with the Spirit and spontaneously sings her praises to the One who has blessed them and will bless the world forever with the children they are helping to bring forth.

"In this Advent season, we in the church are keenly aware that we wait in community for the promises of God to unfold in our lives" our UCC theologian Kate Huey wrote in her reflections on our text this week. "Here, in community, we hold each other up when one of us needs encouragement or support. We help one another search for meaning, rejoice with one another, walk alongside each other. Just as Elizabeth must have listened to Mary, and helped her prepare for what was to come (at least, as much as such a marvelous thing might be prepared for), we help one another work things out. Sometimes, we just sit in the dark quiet and wait, together, trusting in the promises of God, listening for a word from the Stillspeaking God."

You know I can't resist a plug here... for that is what we do every 3rd or 4th Saturday of the month right here in our Sanctuary as those who sit in a circle lit by our Christ candle hold ourselves, one another, and you in our thoughts and prayers as we come together in the silence. This light is not only for our own path but for yours as well and all those for whom we shine the light of Christ's love.

And this is part of the HOPE that we hold for each other and for our world – that the light of Christ's love will shine more brightly in the year ahead, that our faith and our love for each other and for all of God's children will bring about a change in a world gone mad with violence and greed.

Mary speaks to the future even as she claims God's work has already been done. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "she was singing about it ahead of time – not in the future tense but in the past, as if the promise had already come true. Prophets almost never get their verb tenses straight," she says, "because part of their gift is being able to see the world as God sees it – not divided into things that are already over and things that have not happened yet, but as an eternally unfolding mystery that surprises everyone."

This is the attitude I want each of us to embrace in our lives whether we see ourselves as prophets or not. Holding onto the mystery of God unfolding daily in our lives and in our world as powerful and positive and profound. Hope isn't just about sitting around with our friends and praying for a better world it's also about going out and proclaiming that a better world is possible and working together to bring it about. Sing your song loud that others may hear you and join in. Find yourself harmonizing with others as they sing for justice and fairness and equality among all of God's people.

As Advent gives way to Christmas, let the hope that burns so brightly in each one of us light your life and the world with a new way of being, a new way of shining and a new way of singing the song God continues to sing to all of us.

"Shoot of Jesse, Key of David, Desire of Nation"

by Maren C. Tirabassi

O gnarled Root as well as fragile Shoot,
who reminds us
that the sap of hope and humor
flows in those who walk
among the holly-thorns of dementia —
come and honor
those who have told the story.

O Key of the shelter where homeless
and the battered dwell,
where children at risk
are doing their home-work,
Key of the half-way houses,
and sober homes,

Key of death row, of refugee tent,
of under the underpass
cardboard box —
come and open,
that no innkeeper may turn away.

O Desire who cries for the breast
in borrowed diapers
and an indiscriminate manger,
across all borders,
you who are of no politics
and all people,
of no nation and all justice,
of no religion and all faith,
come and stand in our road dust,
in our star dust,
in the dust of our magnificats.

Amen.