

See, I Have Come to Do Your Will

Luke 1:47-55; Hebrews 10:5-10

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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We have reached the last Sunday of Advent.

Two days ago, was the darkest day of our year. Tomorrow night we will welcome the light of Christ at our Christmas Eve service. In another two days, our waiting will be over, and Christmas will be here.

So, what are we waiting for? What have we been waiting for this Advent season?

Of course, the “Sunday School answer” is “Jesus!”

But as we all know, familiar answers can become *too* familiar. What does it really mean to say we are waiting for Jesus?

The last few Sundays I’ve been focusing on two words or two seemingly contrasting ideas in my sermons.

Righteousness and Fear. Do we pursue God for God’s own sake or because we’re afraid of the consequences if we don’t?

Joy and Fire. Can we rejoice in the Lord’s coming even when we have ominous words about judgment like those from John the Baptist echoing in our heads?

This morning, the two words might be “birth” and “death.”

We have heard two texts, one likely very familiar and seasonally appropriate, and the other... well, I’m guessing it seemed an awkward fit two days before Christmas.

We have Mary’s *Magnificat* and a passage from Hebrews which talks about sacrifices and offerings and about the body of Christ being offered up for our sanctification.

One is a song of joy heralding the coming birth of Jesus; the other is an interpretation of the significance of his death.

On this last Sunday of Advent, we have the bookends of Jesus' story—the hope that ushered in his birth and the salvation that his death would make possible.

Let's start with *The Magnificat*, Mary's song of praise which points to the great reversal of history.

We hear this song at Christmas time, and we sigh, and we smile. It sure sounds good.

The poor and lowly being lifted up, the proud and powerful being scattered and brought down, the hungry being filled with good things and the rich being sent away empty... who wouldn't celebrate this upending of the status quo?

Well, the rich, probably. Those who have never known hunger. Those who have power, status, influence. Those who in their pride imagine that they have achieved their station in life on their own merit.

People sort of like me, sort of like us.

We are, for the most part, not the poor, the lowly, the hungry. We are, for the most part, the ones Mary's song says will be scattered, brought down, and sent away.

It can be an unsettling thing to read the Magnificat from our social location as twenty-first century westerners.

Many of us have the luxury of hearing the Magnificat as a theological abstraction, a future hope.

But I wonder how this song sounds on the reserve? Or in immigrant communities huddled in the ghettos of our big cities? Or for the working poor left behind in economic downturns? Or those struggling along on meagre pensions or disability insurance.

For them, the hope of Mary's song is not a nice Bible passage to hear around Christmas time each year but a desperate need.

And how "nice" is Mary's song? Its familiar place in the liturgical furniture of Advent can easily prevent us from hearing it for what it is: a subversive song.

One commentator described it as "a radical, hope-drenched song that soars with promise for the

world's poor, brokenhearted, and oppressed.”¹

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said,

"It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings.... This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. **It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.**"²

One more quote (I often comment that Advent and Christmas have the best songs; they also seem to produce some of the best writing!). This one comes from Debie Thomas who I quoted last week:

"My soul magnifies the Lord," Mary sings, and then her song goes on to do just that. To make more visible and clear—to magnify for the world—a God invested in revolutionary and lasting change for his creation. Mary describes a reality in which our sinful and unjust status quo is gorgeously reversed: the proud are scattered and the humble honored. The hungry are fed and the rich sent away. The powerful are brought down, and the lowly are lifted up. Mary describes a world reordered and renewed—a world so beautifully characterized by love and justice, **only the Christ she carries in her womb can birth it into being.**³

This is more than a bit of pleasant biblical poetry to usher us into the Christmas season. This is dangerous stuff. The powerful have always known it.

King Herod knew it, with his desperate attempt to get rid of Jesus before he could even take his first steps.

Three decades or so later, the Jewish leaders and the Roman occupiers would also know it as they sent him to his death.

But even much later, the hope of this song has been deemed too threatening to public order.

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2034>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

According to one commentator,

Mary's song is so subversive in its cultural, socioeconomic and political implications, it has been banned many times in modern history. When the British ruled India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being sung in churches. Similarly, during the "Dirty War" in Argentina, after the mothers of disappeared children postered the capital plaza with the words of the Magnificat, the military junta banned all public displays of the song. Too much hope, they decided, is a dangerous thing.⁴

So, it has long been recognized that Mary's song has deep social implications—at least by those in social locations that are different than ours.

It also has a lot to say theologically. It's interesting that Mary's song also gets the timing all wrong.

Did you notice that it's written in the present tense? The Lord *has done* these things.

But Jesus hasn't done anything yet. He hasn't preached or baptized or performed any miracles. He hasn't overthrown any rulers. There are still plenty of poor people who are exploited by the rich! The oppressive Roman Empire marches on.

Jesus hasn't fixed anything! He certainly hasn't died or risen from the dead or ascended into heaven! He hasn't even been *born!!*

Yet somehow Mary knows that her child will change things. She knows—somehow—that the baby in her womb marks the turning point of God's story. She knows that his kingdom, strange though it is, and gradual though its appearance might be, will *have no end*.

She knows that her unborn baby is the object of her people's longing, that he is the object of all of creation's longing.

Her song is an expression of faith and trust.

So, what do we do with Mary's subversive, hope-drenched song?

⁴ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2034>

I think that we have one of two temptations when it comes to the revolutionary future promised by Mary's song.

The first temptation is to project this hope into a remote future that demands nothing of us. The great reversal of Mary's song becomes as harmless as harps and clouds and great hymn-sings in the sky. It becomes part of the furniture of an otherworldly heaven that leaves this world unchanged.

The second temptation is to turn it into *our* personal agenda. Mary's song becomes one more thing that God requires of us. We imagine that the kingdom coming depends upon our efforts, our politics, our activism, our piety.

In the first case, we sit idly by waiting for God to do God's thing (and enjoying the status quo until then).

In the second case, we relegate God to the margins as we busy ourselves doing God's work.

My sense is that as Mennonites our temptation is more the second than the first.

We have a keen historical sense of what it means to be persecuted, marginalized, on the outside.

We are also doers. There is this deeply pragmatic ethos that pervades our ethnic and theological DNA. So we treat the themes of Mary's song like a few items on a business meeting agenda, we roll up our sleeves and we get to work.

But I wonder if we often forget the first words out of Mary's mouth:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

God is the subject of Mary's song. Is God the subject of ours?

Or do we simply set to work at God's business of lifting up the poor and pursuing justice without paying God a second thought?

The danger of this is that as human beings we inevitably make a mess of things. We make progress here and there, sure, but we also stubbornly and persistently insert ourselves into God's agenda.

We get things wrong. We make mistakes. We hurt when we think we're helping (i.e., flooding African countries with cheaply-made Western toys and creating confusion, conflict and waste in the process).

Very often, the poor and the vulnerable become "causes" or, worse, advertisements for our

virtue, rather than people.

And it's very easy for us to treat all of our efforts to turn Mary's song into a reality on our own as one more way earn salvation, to prove our worth, to atone for our sins.

For these reasons, I think it's important to hear Hebrews 10 alongside Luke 1 on the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

Hebrews 10 points not to idyllic scenes of creche and cradle but a cross.

It is located in the broader context of an indictment of Israel's sacrificial system of atoning for sin outlined in Exodus and Leviticus. Over and over the priests would have to pour out the blood of animals for the sins of the people.

But the system never ends. Blood just keeps spilling and nobody ever gets any holier. The root of the problem remains. Something new and different is required.

Hebrews 10 makes a staggering claim. It says that the sacrificial system is not God's will, has never really been what God wants, and that it has come to an end in the giving up of a body.

A body that comes to say, "See, I have come to do your will."

A body in whom the fullness of humanity and divinity dwells. A body that offers itself up for all of our sin and all of our mistakes and all of our sacrificial impulses, all of our attempts to earn God's favour.

A body that makes what is unholy holy. A body that offers its life so that we can truly live, forgiven, cleansed, and set free from our sins—structural sins, corporate sins and personal sins.

We know that the body whose arrival we celebrate in Bethlehem's manger will of course one day be broken and battered, cruelly snuffed out on Calvary's cross, a handful of kilometers from where it was first adored as heaven's gift to earth.

But we'd probably rather not think of all that just yet. Why ruin Christmas with Good Friday?

Well, the short answer is because the cradle and the cross go together. It cannot be otherwise. Christmas without Easter is not good enough news for us.

A baby in a manger brings us gifts that we cannot do without—gifts of hope, comfort, affirmation, joy, the promise of a life that will lead to a great reversal for the poor and the downtrodden.

These things we desperately need, and Christmas brings them.

But a baby in a manger does not take enough away.

Our sin, for example.

Our failures and our misdeeds. The bad we inadvertently do while trying to do good. The many ways in which we miss the mark. The ways in which even our good deeds are tinged with self-interest and self-promotion.

Our fears and anxieties. The guilt and shame that for many are crippling daily realities. Our afflictions and addictions.

The pain that we endure because of the sins of others. The ways in which so many are victims of deeply embedded structures of oppression that they can do nothing to change.

For all of this, we need a body, come finally to do God's will for all of us who can't and won't.

Christmas *is* about the beautiful truth of the incarnation—that God comes near, takes on human skin, and redeems the human condition. But it is not just about this.

Christmas *is* about the hope of Mary's subversive song—that God is with the poor, the lowly, the hungry, the outcast, and that those who follow Christ are invited to participate in this kingdom coming. But it is not just about this.

But Christmas is also about God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Dying *because* of us, dying *for* us, dying as an expression of love and forgiveness, dying, and then rising again to defeat sin, death, and the enemy.

We can sing Mary's song; but we can't make Mary's song happen.

We can't bring about God's kingdom, even though many have tried throughout history, and many continue to try.

We can participate, we can align ourselves, as best we are able, to the future to which we are called, but we must remember how Mary's song begins and ends.

With God. God alone can be trusted with the hopes and fears of all the years.

I want to close with the words of Debie Thomas. I quoted her earlier in a discussion of how *The Magnificat* has been banned by those who decided that "too much hope was a dangerous thing." She goes on to say this:

But "too much hope" is precisely what we're called to cultivate and proclaim on this fourth and final Sunday in Advent. The Messiah is almost here, Mary tells us, and the promise of his lasting reign changes everything. There is no unjust system, oppressive hierarchy, or arrogant leadership structure that God will not upend. No promise God will fail to keep. No broken, exploited life God will not save. So find your voice and sing your song—and share it with the world.⁵

My prayer is that we would go out into the Christmas hope with “too much hope” in our hearts.

Too much to be reasonable. Too much to be plausible. Too much to passively sit by and be content with the status quo. Certainly too much for us to accomplish on our own.

Too much hope for anyone but the God who comes to us, born a child in a manger. Too much hope for anyone but the God who gives himself away as the sacrifice to end all sacrifice.

May our souls truly magnify the Lord, to make him more visible and clear. And may our spirits rejoice in God our Saviour, whose coming is at hand.

Amen.



⁵ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2034>