

twelvebaskets



ADVENT 4C

A complete Sunday service ready to use
for worship and inspire ideas in your church

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Fourth Sunday of Advent - Year C
22nd December 2024



Order of Service

Call to worship

Hymn:

165 STF – Advent candles tell their story OR

174 STF – Light a candle in a darkened place

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Hymn:

175 STF – Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness OR

213 STF – O little town of Bethlehem

Readings: Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

Hymn:

654 STF – The love of God comes close where stands an open door OR

209 STF – Let me tell you about a baby

Reflections on the readings

Hymn:

208 STF – Let earth and heaven combine OR

662 STF – Have you heard God's voice; has your heart been stirred?

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

Hymn:

199 STF – Glory to God on high OR

204 STF – In the bleak midwinter

Blessing

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Call to worship

Into this time of worship, come by your Spirit O God.
Lift and inspire,
Carry and comfort,
Bless and encourage each one of us as we pray, listen, sing and worship.
Come, Lord of light,
Amen.¹

Hymn:

165 STF – Advent candles tell their story OR
174 STF – Light a candle in a darkened place

Opening Prayers

Lord God,
Creator of heaven and earth,
Author of our salvation,
Our comfort and our strength,
We thank you for all the good gifts you have bestowed upon us.

We sing your praise and offer our voices to join with the angels to proclaim that you are good and your love endures forever.

Forgive us when we turn our faces from you,
Encourage us when we step in faith to follow you,
And guide us as we seek to build your kingdom here and now.

Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

What's your song?

As Christmas draws ever nearer, preparations are in full swing. How many here have done all their gift shopping? Who prefers to give the gift rather than receive? The busyness of the season is fully upon us.

This passage in Luke can sometimes get a little lost in the retelling of Jesus' birth. The Nativity plays we see can often cut out this visit to Elizabeth and skip along straight to the journey to Bethlehem. What do we make of this scene? We have Mary going to visit her cousin after discovering that God has chosen her to bear his son. She's engaged to marry Joseph and has a different life planned when God disrupts this plan.

¹ Call to worship written by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Sheila Matthews

The beauty of this story is in how the two women react to this unexpected situation. Elizabeth, who had not thought she would be a mother, feels the baby she is carrying leap at the sound of Mary's voice. She sees the presence of Mary as a blessing. She is overcome with joy that her Lord would visit her. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and understands that God is there with them. And she reacts with exuberance, 'Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!'

This reaction from Elizabeth must've been so encouraging for Mary. Have you ever made a decision to do something or try something new and you tell a friend about it and they are as excited, or sometimes even more excited, as you are about it? I wonder if God sent Mary to Elizabeth to get a big dose of positivity and encouragement.

Mary's response to this exuberance is her song. A song that catalogues how Mary, this teenager, unwed, low in status by society's standards, feels about being singled out and chosen by God. We have this beautiful opening refrain:

'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.'

God has selected someone overlooked by society, someone who wasn't even married which would have given her a marginally better status, and decided to use her to bring hope to the world. Mary turns something which would be overwhelming and frightening into an outpouring of thanksgiving. She sees how God has made her a part of history and focuses all the feelings surrounding this into worship of God.

She then proceeds to explain why God is worthy of this praise. Outlining the ways God has been good to his people through mighty deeds, bringing down rulers, lifting the humble; Mary describes how God is faithful.

This Bible reading is such a great reminder of how we can shift our focus when we find ourselves in unexpected circumstances. We may not be able to relate to the colossal responsibility Mary was given but I imagine we all have had moments in life when we are unsure of why we have ended up in a particular scenario. Have you ever asked God what his plan is here? Well, Mary gives us a great illustration of how sometimes we must let go of trying to fully understand of 'why' we find ourselves thrust into a position we did not expect, and consider 'how' we turn our focus into praise and thanksgiving. Where is God placing you at the moment? What are the circumstances you find yourself in which could be overwhelming? What would your song sound like today? Can you think of the ways God has been faithful in your life and turn those into words of praise and thanksgiving even when you have no guarantee how things will turn out?

[If suitable for your context, you could allow people some time to write their own songs of praise that reflect where they find themselves right now]

As we embark on the days leading up to our celebration of Jesus' birth, may we all hold onto a piece of Mary's example and look for moments to exclaim, 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.'³

³ All Age Talk written by Sheila Matthews

Hymn:

175 STF – Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness OR

213 STF – O little town of Bethlehem

Readings: Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

Hymn:

654 STF – The love of God comes close where stands an open door OR

209 STF – Let me tell you about a baby

Reflections on the readings

This reflection focusses on the optional part of the gospel reading, vv. 46-55, Mary's song – the Magnificat. The text of this should be included in the service, by reading it as part of the gospel reading and/or by singing it in a suitable version (e.g. StF60 My soul rejoices in God my saviour). You could give worshippers a card with the text on that they could take home with them – this could be bought or made. It doesn't matter which of the other readings are read in the service.

There is something amazing about the act of singing. That applies however good, or otherwise, a singer you are! To sing expresses more than just the words of a song: it gives passion, emotion and feeling. We can sing to celebrate, sing to lament or simply sing to pass the time. Singing has a special place in nearly all forms of Christian worship – in many different styles and ways – but at root it is a way that we use the breath God has given us to praise God.

Way back into the pages of the Hebrew scriptures, we discover God's people singing in praise to God from Miriam at the exodus of the Israelites (Exodus 15:20), to the Psalms and on to the various songs included in the New Testament. Today we look at one of the most significant of those: Mary's song, sometimes called the Magnificat, from its first word in Latin.

For some Christians, the Magnificat is very familiar: it forms part of the service of Evening Prayer in many traditions and would be said or sung daily. For others, we might only encounter it at this time of year, when we read the stories leading up to Jesus' birth. How familiar does it feel to you?

[If it seems appropriate, you may like to read it again here or encourage the congregation to look at the text on a screen or cards.]

In Luke's telling of the story, Mary's song is her response to the news that she would bear God's child Jesus and to her visit to her cousin Elizabeth who declared, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb Jesus.' Pause for a moment just to reflect on all the thoughts and emotions that must have been whirling through both of their minds. Their pregnancies are unexpected – thought impossible – and the way their lives will change cannot be imagined. But their response is to praise God.

Mary's song draws on the song of another woman giving thanks to God: in 1 Samuel 2, Hannah, who had been unable to have a child, has finally become mother to Samuel. She takes Samuel and dedicates him to God, to grow up in the temple. Her song of praise exults in God who lifts up the weak and brings down the mighty; raises the poor from the dust and the needy from the ash heap. We might imagine that Mary had learned the scriptures from

an early age, and as she sought words to praise God, found inspiration in those of Hannah, hundreds of years before her.

When Methodist Minister, Rev Neville Ward, wrote his book about praying the Rosary, *Five for sorrow, ten for joy*, he commented that 'in Methodism the silence about the mother of Jesus is positively deafening.' I wonder what your experience has been in churches you've been part of? Have you heard many sermons about Mary? Or thought about her in Bible studies? Perhaps like the Magnificat itself, we only consider Mary briefly as we approach Christmas. But does Mary have something to teach us?

Whatever our theology, we can engage with Mary from the scriptures – Mary gave birth to Jesus (Luke 2:7), she was at the foot of the cross when many of the others had fled (John 19:25) and she was with the apostles in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14, 2:1). The Holy Spirit overshadowed her that she might give birth to Jesus and the Holy Spirit was poured out upon her, the apostles and many others on at Pentecost. It is certainly not stretching scripture to say this was a spirit-filled life! We can think of Mary as a disciple and as an example of what being faithful to God's call can look like.

In thinking today about Mary's song, we can ask what it teaches us. What might God be saying to us through it? We are going to think about it as a song of praise, a song of protest, and a song of prophecy.

A Song of Praise

Mary rejoices in what God has done: she praises God for keeping the promise to her ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants for ever. When we come to worship, we too praise God for all that God has done from the beginning of time until now. God never forgets us, even when we are wayward, and God's promise lasts for ever. Like Mary, we can – and we should – praise God for that.

Mary's praise of God is also personal: God is *her* Saviour who has looked upon *her* in her lowliness. God has done great things *for her*. As we come to worship, we come to a God who knows us as we are and who is our Saviour. We come to a God who has done great things for us. We come in humility, thankfulness and praise.

Mary sings of God's mercy that goes on from generation to generation: it's not just in the past, nor does it stop at her, but it goes on for ever. We stand in that line and we worship a God who is active in our world today. When we celebrate Holy Communion, we often say that we join with the angels and archangels to sing God's praise – holy, holy, holy. And Mary's song, like the angels', proclaims that God's name is holy (Luke 1:49). When we come to praise God for all these things, we join with Mary and with the saints of every age in that great crowd who worship God in eternity..

A Song of Protest

Mary's song of praise does not forget the realities of the world where injustice is real and many suffer. She knew of the suffering of the poor, of those who went hungry, of people who were oppressed by powerful rulers and much more. She sang of the God who stands against all of this and who will overthrow it.

As we come to her song 2000 years later, our world is vastly different in so many ways, but we are still in a world where division and injustice is real: rich, poor; full, hungry; powerful, lowly. These are all realities we still know today and which need to be overthrown.

One purpose of protest is to draw attention to injustice. Simply highlighting injustice doesn't overcome it, but injustice that remains hidden will never stop. So shining a light on it is one of the first steps in working for a better world. Whenever we sing, read or say the Magnificat we are shining a light on the injustice of the world: for ourselves to remind us, for the church to remind each other and for anyone who cares to listen. It confronts us each time with the

reality that as we worship, people are going hungry, are without the basic necessities of life and are oppressed. During British colonial rule in India, the singing of the Magnificat at Evensong was banned: thoughts of putting down the mighty from their seat might indeed encourage protest that would be all too real.

A visitor to a service of Evensong was inspired by the singing of the Magnificat: put down the mighty, fill the hungry with good things, send the rich away empty? That's wonderful – what do we do about it?', she said. 'Oh, we sing it again next week' came the answer. Pope Francis famously said, 'You pray for the hungry then you feed them. That's how prayer works.'

Mary's song still highlights for us the injustice of the world – a world where people still lack food and water, shelter, safety, the freedom to live their lives. It asks us the question each time we read, say or sing it: what will you do about it? As we think on that, we might remember Mary's own response to God's call: Here am I the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word (Luke 1:38).

A Song of Prophecy

Mary's song gives us a vision of the coming reign of God – which she longed for and which we long for. The world Mary sings about becomes a reality in the fulfilment of God's purposes: when the proud have truly been scattered, the powerful brought down, the rich sent away empty; the lowly exalted, the hungry fed and all God's promises fulfilled. This is at the heart of our Advent hope as we have prayed week by week, come, Lord Jesus. In God's reign, Jesus is enthroned at the heart of that great crowd from every people and nation and no one goes hungry any longer.

Mary teaches us to listen for God's call and to respond with faith. In our response, we praise God for all God has done. We protest the injustices of the world and join in working to change them. We looking for the prophesied reign of God when all things come together in the fulfilment of God's perfect will. Then with all God's people we will truly magnify the Lord and rejoice in God our Saviour. **Amen.**

Questions for reflection

- Why should we praise God?
- What in the world do you think Christians need to protest about? How might we do it?
- What do you hope for? How might we pray for these things?⁴

Hymn:

208 STF – Let earth and heaven combine OR

662 STF – Have you heard God's voice; has your heart been stirred?

Prayers of intercession

Where ... is indicated you may add your own prayers and specific situations for prayer.

Alternatively, you could use them to leave space for members of the congregation to pray silently or aloud.

Let us pray for all who are in need today.

Creator God, we pray for the world that you have made.

⁴ Reflection written by Mark Rowland

We praise you for your faithfulness and for the many gifts that you have given us in your creation.

We pray for the grace to use them well.

We hold before you a world of injustice and suffering...

We pray for peace in a world of war...

We pray for a fair sharing of food in a world of hunger...

We pray for all who sit in seats of power...

God of every generation
remember us in your mercy

Holy God, we pray for your church in every place.

We praise you for all who have encouraged and inspired us to follow your call.

We pray for strength and grace to persevere through all that may come.

We pray for all who share the Good News in their words and actions...

We pray for the work of this church and the churches of this area...

We pray for those who follow your call in the face of danger and persecution...

We pray for those listening for your call today...

God of every generation
remember us in your mercy

Healing God, we pray for those who suffer today.

We pray for those who are ill or injured, at home or in hospital...

We pray for those who are fearful for what tomorrow will bring...

We pray for those who struggle for food, money, clothing and other basics of life...

We pray for those who mourn, those whose loss is recent and those who remember at this time of year... and we remember before you those who have died...

We pray for those who need to hear your song of joy and hope today.

God of every generation
remember us in your mercy.

In a few moments of silence, we offer our own prayers to God...

We praise you, loving God, for that great crowd of witnesses from every time and place: for all who have sung your praises. We join our prayers with theirs, offering them to you in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour.

Amen.⁵

We will now take up the offering.

⁵ Prayers of intercession written by Mark Rowland

Christmas God,
The hour of celebrating your incarnation is coming,
The streets are bustling,
The lights are lit.
Come, Lord Jesus, and use the gifts we have, the gifts here in this room,
To help to bring about a peaceful, joyful, hopeful world this Christmas time.

Amen.⁶

Hymn:

199 STF – Glory to God on high OR

204 STF – In the bleak midwinter

Blessing

Whatever it is that you bring,
Whatever your gifts,
May you find the courage to bring them to the manger-side this Christmas season.
May you be inspired by the miracle of God with us, Immanuel, whatever your Christmas looks like,
And may you be blessed.

Amen.⁷

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker