

Anticipating Justice and Love

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 15 December, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Advent 3A

Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:46b-55

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUuH4whlVU8&t=662s>

We are travelling on journeys by heart in Advent. There are songs that accompany our lives. There are ancient stories that still speak to us.

There are beautiful songs that are joyful and encouraging and hopeful – such as Russia’s Carol that we’ve heard. Thank you, Pitt St Singers, for that music today – and for the music that has accompanied my time here with you.

There are songs that speak more of struggle than hope, but that move us to hope because they name the reality in which we dwell.

*“You speak to me...”
Still your voice remains
in the touch of a lover’s hand
where the water meets the land
in the company of friends
in the wine and the bread
in the face of a stranger
in the frailty of the manger
you speak to me.
You speak to me.*

Rachel’s song tells of a loss of a faith that is certain and safe, that comforts and holds, and yet also limits the mind, limits the journeys of the heart. It speaks of the loss of belonging – and yet finding a greater belonging, not in the confines of traditional church, but in the presence of the holy found in relationship, in creation, in beautiful places like Sydney, where the water meets the land. In sacred stories and practices which can be freed from their doctrinal knots and ties to inspire us – to claim that God is found in the outsider, the stranger; to believe that from the frailty of the manger the world can change, and that we can be nourished by bread and wine shared in compassionate, justice-seeking community.

“You speak to me...” The song speaks of my journey of faith too – leaving certainty for risk and unknowing, in large ways and small, yet trusting in the sacred story that has shaped my life and in the real, motley, human communities of faith in which I have heard that story. (I count myself as much mottled as anyone.) These are songs and stories that cast visions. Visions like the ones we have heard from Isaiah and from Luke’s Gospel that tells Mary’s vision.

We have travelled out of the known and into the unknown and I acknowledge that this is a day, a stage on the journey for all of us at Pitt St. For Clare and for me and for all of you. I've been thinking about the journey of arriving here six years ago – and the risk and unknowing of that. And the growing to feel belonging, in the Uniting Church, particularly in Pitt St. But even to feel a bit belonging to Australia as a New Zealander here.

I'm grateful for the opportunities I've had to journey in this beautiful land. And there are still other places yet to journey and yet to belong, I hope! One of the places that I haven't been to yet, that I do long to go to is Western Australia. I want to go to the Kimberly. I want to go to Margaret River. These are places on my Australian bucket list. I hope they are on Clare's – though I know that my idea of going in a camper van is not one that she really shares. But we have time to talk about this.

We have friends who live in Margaret River and the photos and the stories they put on Facebook make it sound like the land of milk and honey – or to be more precise the land of wine and chocolate and cheese. It does sound like heaven on earth. Another more uplifting, lofty thing I want to see in Western Australia is the wildflowers.

Flowers that bloom in the desert are not only beautiful, they are joyful and hopeful. For millennia the image of flowers blooming in the desert has sustained people living in places that are arid, not just geographically arid, but socially and politically arid. So we hold that vision of flowers in the desert on this third Sunday in Advent, the Sunday for Joy.

And yet, New South Wales burns - and today, Sydney chokes again on smoke. So, finding joy does not come easily to us. You would think that after the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit vote, and the election here of a climate-change-denying, religious discrimination promoting government, that I would not be surprised by the election of Boris Johnson's government in the UK. And yet I was. I think that we live in the axis between deep despair and ferocious hope that we talked about last week. It is important to both name our despair – our reality, our exile - and to touch our hopes together.

So, in the midst of our context, we look again at Isaiah's vision. A ferociously hopeful vision. Speaking into the hopelessness of exile; telling out the glory of God; that the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; that the desert shall rejoice and blossom. This year, as I read that passage, other images that have had less impact on me in the past leapt of the page:

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the scorched earth shall become a lake, and the parched land springs of water... A highway shall be there, and it shall be called a Sacred Path for God's people.

In Jesus, we know, that we understand that God's people includes all people. And then it says: *no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.*

"Not even fools shall go astray" is undoubtedly a much-needed word of hope in times of political exile, because those fools with whom we are so angry are also God's people – and we need to find ways to join with them in God's project of liberation and hope.

Let me remind you again, for a minute, of our Advent theme at Pitt St - the quotation from Richard Flanagan's article on climate change: "*we will discover the language of hope in the quality of our courage.*"

We will discover the language of hope in the quality of our courage.

The only way out of this - is hope that is not passive waiting, but courageous anticipation of love and justice, in which we enact in whatever small way we can, a different world, another way of being.

As we approach Christmas in this turning point of Advent, we are reminded that there is a highway, a way of living, that has been charted for us - and we will make that way by walking. We will make that way by walking it!

The stories of Mary's pregnancy and Jesus' birth are stories that accompany us as we walk. We tell ourselves these stories again and again, not because they are factual but because they are truthful. Deeply truthful stories!

I feel obliged to do the sidebar about Mary's virginity at this point, in case you haven't heard me make that before. The claims about Mary's virginity and about her submission that have become requirements of so-called orthodox Christian belief are distractions from the truth and wisdom of the story.

Essayist Nancy Rockwell has written a brilliant article titled "*No more lying about Mary.*" I'm going to share a couple of my favourite lines: She says:

"Hiding within the wonder of Christmas are a thousand years of doctrinal female subjugation, doctrines that, like tinsel, are dripped all over the season of Christmas... malicious ideas keeping women from feeling empowered, invited to be strong, and urged by God to imagine new ways to live, as Mary of Nazareth did, who mothered God's redemption of the human world."

She points out that it is not Mary's submission, but Mary's grace that has attracted the attention of the divine. Grace is what Luke show us in Mary's conversation and in Mary's actions - courage, boldness, grit, ringing convictions about justice. Not submissive meekness. Grace is not submission. And the power of the Holy is not meek.

The Magnificat, Mary's song, is a political manifesto, delivered publicly, in the home of an official priest, who is married to Mary's cousin Elizabeth, also pregnant, with John the Baptist. In Mary's manifesto there is evidence of deep thought, strong conviction, and a good deal of political smarts.

Rockwell suggests that this doesn't fit with the idea of a young teenage girl. Dealing with the virgin problem, she points out that the Greek word Luke uses for virgin is an unusual one, a very specific word that means she has not yet born a child. It does not imply that she is sexually inexperienced. My second favourite quote from Rockwell (and this one's shorter) is:

"So let's be clear: the focus is on her uterus. The state of her hymen is not at issue here."

In fact, I would say, that it is entirely beside the point in a way that actually ensures that we miss the point of the dangerous, inspiring song that Mary sings.

I want to turn for a moment, to what precedes the reading that we heard today, because Mary's song comes in the context of her visit to Elizabeth after she has learned of her pregnancy.

In the midst of disturbing news, for surely Mary faces social ostracism and rejection because of this pregnancy, she travels seeking community. She needs safety, affirmation, empathy, and companionship. She needs someone to recognize and nurture and deepen, and celebrate the work of God in her life. Someone who will receive her, not reject her. Love her, not judge her. Nourish her, not condemn her.

I think, people of Pitt St Uniting Church, that this reads like a manifesto for being the church. A prototype for what Christian community should be. When we think about what it is to be the church, let's ask ourselves, here or wherever we find ourselves: what would it be like if we sought each other out with the trust and openness of Mary?

What would it be like if we were like Elizabeth, and received with tenderness those who are vulnerable and marginalised? The people who come to us, seeking refuge?

What would it be like if our communal worship echoed the powerful back and forward call-and-response of these two cousins, Elizabeth and Mary, who find themselves caught up in God's bold, risky, world-changing work - and decide at that moment to find strength in each other? And strength in God's call on their lives in a way that enables Mary to be profoundly courageous and countercultural, to trust the inner vision that few others understand or value.

Elizabeth recognizes that Mary's faith is precious - that faith alone, faith in the sense of trust, not requirements to adhere to particular beliefs, but that trusting faith, will resource and enable the ongoing challenges that Mary's journey will present. So Elizabeth names and blesses - she blesses Mary's capacity for trust as a gift that is worth cherishing.

In this Gospel story is a pattern for Christian worship that endures: Mary and Elizabeth - the young and the old, the unmarried, the married and the partnered however, the socially established and the socially vulnerable - finding common ground in love for Jesus - and a commitment to follow in the way of Jesus. As Henri Nouwen describes it:

"God's most radical intervention in history was listened to and received in community."

This is a glorious and challenging task for us to live up to as the church.

That blessing, that Elizabeth gives to Mary, grounds her, so that she sings for joy, sings with power, despite everything that is, in hopeful expectation, not just of a birth, but an expectation of what will be.

Once Mary finds community and blessing, she utters her prophetic voice in song. Not just any song, but a radical, hope-filled song that soars with promise for the world's poor and broken-hearted and oppressed people.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer described the Magnificat in this way:

"It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent song ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings.... This song has none of the sweetness or playfulness of some Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong song about the power of God and the powerlessness, on one level, but the enormous co-creating power on another, of humankind."

"My soul magnifies God," Mary sings, and her song goes on to do that. To make more visible and clear - to magnify for the world - a God who is invested in revolutionary and lasting change for all creation.

The proud are scattered and the humble honoured. The hungry fed and the rich sent empty away. The powerful are brought down, and the lowly are lifted up. Mary describes a world reordered and renewed - a world characterized by love and justice, as she carries the Christ into being.

Mary's song is so subversive in its cultural, socioeconomic and political implications, that it has actually been banned several times in modern history. When the British ruled India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being sung in churches.

In the "Dirty War" in Argentina, after the mothers of the 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.

But "*too much hope*" is precisely what we are called to cultivate and proclaim on this third Sunday in Advent. This time of endings and beginnings. The Messiah is almost here, Mary tells us, and the promise of God's lasting reign will change everything - has changed 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 that God will not save.

As we come to this moment in Advent, may our voices be found. May we find our voices and sing our songs of hope and liberation - and share them with the world.

As we do this, may we claim again the faith that is ours. The faith that God loves us. That God has always loved us - and that we are held within that faith.

In a moment, we are going to sing a song that we have sung a couple of times at the "Second Sundays" contemporary worship that we've held on Sunday afternoons that Rachel has initiated. It is a song that you can stand and sing along with, after Rachel sings the first verse. It is about the gravity of love. About the way that God grounds us and holds us and the whole universe in love.

*I lift my eyes up to the hills
This my morning song
Where my strength comes from
I lift my eyes up to the hills
This my evening song
Where my help comes from
This is the gravity of love
Just as the moon follows the sun
You're all around me
You're holding everything
This is the hope of every land
Just as the universe expands
Your love is reaching
You're holding everything*