

I've been thinking a lot about what Christmas is all about. Christmas is, quite literally, the Mass of Christ – the worship event where we celebrate and honour Christ's birth – coming to us in a time of darkness and reframing the world to light. This is made even more symbolic to us in the northern hemisphere when we recognize the change of season – and the return of light marked by the Winter Solstice. But it is even more symbolic and significant when we think of the events of the world – the darkness of war and death that we fear will overtake us.

Today's scripture is magnificent – in fact, it is the Magnificat – an ancient hymn sung by Mary – quite similar in style and content and even description to hymns sung by Hannah, Samuel's mother in the Old Testament, and that Zechariah sings when his son, John the Baptist is born.

These hymns hold both praise and political undertones. You see, Jesus didn't come only to save the world from sin – which is great and wonderful indeed. Jesus Christ came into the world to save the entire world - socially, politically, economically, and spiritually.

Jesus entered a world dominated by Roman law, where terms like evangelism, gospel, and Emmanuel were politically charged. The term "gospel" was associated with spreading news of the birth of an heir to the empire's throne or a victorious battle. Spreading the gospel, in this sense, was usually accompanied by pomp and ceremony. Emmanuel, meaning "God with us," was a title claimed by emperors like Antiochus IV, Epiphanes and Domitian.

In a world where Caesar was considered the savior, the arrival of Jesus disrupted the political narrative. Listen to the following hymn to Caesar that was found chiseled on the ruins of an old government building in Asia Minor, dated 6 BC. This is, of course, translated from the Latin:

"The most divine Caesar...we should consider equal to the Beginning of all things...for when everything was falling into disorder and tending towards dissolution, he restored it once more and gave the whole world a new aura.

Caesar...the common good Fortune of all...The beginning of life and vitality...

All the cities unanimously adopt the birthday of the divine Caesar as the new beginning of the year... Whereas the Providence which has regulated our whole existence...has brought our life to the climax of perfection in giving to us (the emperor) Augustus...who being sent to us and our descendants as Saviour, has put an end to war and has set all things in order.

and whereas having become god manifest, Caesar has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier times...

the birthday of the god (Augustus) has been for the whole world the beginning of the gospel concerning him..."

It is into this world that an angel appears to Mary – and tells her that she will bear a son – by the Holy Spirit and this child will be called the most divine. And this child will be our saviour. And this good news – *this* gospel would be different than the hope and the peace brought by Rome. *This* good news and new hope was counter what was seen as right and noble and productive. This good news was actually good news for the underdog!

Jesus' birth narrative echoes the pattern seen throughout biblical history, where God chooses the underdog to bring light to a nation in darkness.

Remember David? David – an ancestor of Jesus through Joseph? David was the great-grandson of a poor Midianite woman, named Ruth. David was the youngest, and David was a shepherd. In their book, *Jesus for President*, Shane Clayborne and Chris Haw write: “Shepherding was not a very dignified job. It was more like the bottom rung of the chores list, and it was usually reserved for kids...It was a life much like that lived by Bedouin children and peasants around the world. Shepherds were not necessarily the sharpest and the brightest, and they weren’t the most logical choice for a king...”

Yet out of all the brawny sons of Jesse, God chose David, the youngest. “The anointed David would go on to be the little kid who killed the giant Goliath ...The Scriptures say that even as everyone was preparing for the big fight, David was going back and forth to care for the sheep” ...he couldn’t even move with all the armour they tried to put on him.

While its true that David later did some awful stuff – when confronted with his sins, he repented. Later he also had some pretty good intentions regarding building a more stable house for God – But God had different plans – instead, through David, God would establish a house – not made of wood and mortar – but of flesh and blood – and the Spirit of God – the Messiah.

From a shepherd to a king – from a murderer and adulterer to a repentant whose line would bear the Messiah. It is a resounding theme in our Bible “The great paradox and humour of God’s audacious power: a stuttering prophet will be the voice of God, a barren old lady will become the mother of a nation, a shepherd boy will become their king and a homeless baby will lead them home. (Clayborne and Haw: *Jesus for President*)” Always God circumvents the powers and principalities of the world through the small and powerless.

Now, Mary was not a queen, nor a princess – nor even a respectably married woman. But an angel appeared to her – a messenger from God – and revealed to her that she was the one through whom God would birth the Messiah. She would be, literally, the house for God!

And instead of questioning whether this message was really meant for *her* (as if God’s promise somehow depended on her own personal success or achievement), she only asked “How can this be?”

Instead of arguing, Mary only responded, “Let it be with me according to your word” It seems that Mary understood something that we often forget – that nothing ever is impossible with God.

And so, with the political jargon of the time and knowing full well that it is the language of the mighty, Mary sang of a new king...a transformed ruler...the new David...a new shepherd – a new gospel that embodied and promoted true shalom, not the political peace and stability of a secular government.

This ruler would lift the lowly, feed the hungry, tear the mighty bullies from their seats, gather those who are destitute and lost and bring about shalom -- a state of wholeness and unity, of restored relationship.

In her song, Mary sang of this hope in her heart – and she sang of God’s WORD coming to flesh.

⁴⁶And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸for he has looked with favor
on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

Several things jump out at me when I read this first part of Mary's song.

First. Mary says, "my soul magnifies the Lord."

I think that we often think this means that her soul thinks that God is magnificent! And truly, the word, "Magnificat" is derived from magnify/magnificent. And has come to mean "Mary's song of praise." BUT we forget what the other part of magnify means – Like a magnifying glass makes things bigger – so that we can see the little details – or even microscopes – where we can see things that we didn't know were there – Mary's soul magnifies the Lord. Through Mary the world can better see God – and God's desire for the world.

And my spirit – all of me – she says – my ruach – my breath, spirit, mood, life - rejoices in God my savior – why? Because God has looked with favor on her and has found her worthy.

And then Mary says that all generations will call her blessed – why? Not because she's going to have a miraculous baby – nor because God chose her above all other women – but because the Mighty One has done great things for her and holy is his name." Again – it is about God – and God's will that has come to rest inside of her.

This word "blessed" in the Greek does not mean happy but it means "indwelt by God and fully satisfied." Mary's life was certainly blessed, but it was also filled with a combination of both joy and tragedy. It wasn't the circumstances of her life that brought her happiness but the indwelling of God amid the circumstances. She was the first disciple and a beautiful example of what it meant to be indwelt by Christ. She called herself the handmaiden – the servant or slave of God.

Mary continues: ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud
in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Mary's song fleshes out what it means to be blessed by God. She says, "His mercy is for those who fear him" and "He has lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things. He has helped his

servant Israel; he is merciful because he remembers the promise he made to Abraham and his descendants forever.

Mary's song envisions a new world order not a reversal of fortune not switched around and backward or inside - out, but completely different. This is the God who granted Sabbath rest to the people, who disciplined their kings and longed for the people to show integrity in life, in worship and in their economics.

God always has something else in mind. God defies our expectations. It may be tempting to assume Mary's song is about how God will reverse the world's hierarchy (those who used to be in power are now sent away empty while the hungry get to lord it over their previous oppressors). But this does not satisfy.

Switching who's on top and who's on bottom leaves the old order in place. The only thing that changes is that the poor used to be rich and the hungry used to be fed.

And while many would see this song as being evidence that God does exactly this – take away and give – I believe Mary's song is a hymn of praise to an unconventional God. A God who desires for no one to be hungry, and for no one to be poor – but the haughty to be brought down – and the poor to be lifted up...a God who desires for Abraham's descendants to be a blessing to their neighbours – instead of ruling over them. A God who chooses an occasionally wise mighty king – and a wise young teen to be houses – homes for God.

So much of life seems empty of the sacred, but if we have eyes to see and ears to hear and a heart to listen, we can begin to find God ever present in all of life even the difficult and mundane.

We are quick to ask to be blessed, but do we know what we are really asking? Asking God to bless us is not inviting God to approve our plans but is asking God to dwell in us and interfere with our lives and make the ordinary sacred. Like Mary, it will mean trust, faith and obedience.

This Advent – this fourth week - you and I are invited to reflect on the ways of God in the world – in our hearts and minds, our families and communities, our church, and neighbourhoods. We are invited to be on the lookout for the God who makes all things new, in often surprising ways.

We are invited to think about what it might look like to give up our winner/loser mentality and live in a way that “magnifies” God's generosity toward all and God's special concern for the least.

What would it look like if we, like David, took to heart God's blessing and realized that our plans aren't necessarily what God wants.

What would it look like to trust that God will do something big with us – yet have no clue what that will be?

What would it look like to accept what this messenger has told you – that God desires to bless – to dwell in – all of us?

What would it look like to truly say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Amen and Amen. May it be so.