

I. Advanced Organizer

A. I distinctly remember the first time I cried in church.

1. **It was Christmas Eve and I was probably about seven years old.** I was sitting in a pew at the Presbyterian church my family attended: a church complete with stain glass windows and candle lighters, choir members in robes and sermons from the pastor that I generally found tedious and dull. For us children on Christmas Eve night, **church was the chore we needed to get through before the magic happened.** We put on our special Christmas finery and tried to sit quietly and not be too disruptive as we doodled in the bulletins, looking ahead to the family dinner party we'd go to afterwards, followed of course by the climactic coming of Santa.
2. But for some reason, this Christmas Eve evening squirming in that pew in my fancy Christmas dress, **something caught ahold of me.** I don't remember what exactly the pastor was saying or even that he was saying it in a particularly affecting way. **But I do remember the connection that was made in my mind and heart.** As the pastor and others in the service retold the story of the first Christmas my heart latched on to an important detail I had not yet understood. **Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a poor, young girl, a girl not much older than me.** I was used to the Mary in the family nativity set; the one perched on my mother's piano. She didn't look like a young girl as she sat in porcelain serenely staring at her new baby. Neither did the Mary in the picture books my Sunday school teacher showed us. Those Mary's seemed mature and wise, and at least 25. But this news, that there was a God of the whole universe who chose for this special role of caring for God's one-time coming-to-be-with-people appearance a poor, humble, young girl - **this did something in me.** I began to weep.
3. As an adult I can't help but wonder if my seven year old self was so moved because I understand now what she was going through at the time in a way that she couldn't understand. I understand now that she was navigating the complicated dynamics of trying to live as a happy, joyful child finding her way in the world with plenty to celebrate, plenty of opportunities allowing things to go well in her life, but **also being drawn into a deep family pain, as a dark web of sexual abuse and incest that had been forming over generations caught her as its latest victim. She was a child who'd begun to know secrets,** not the kind you whisper gleefully to your friends at overnights, but the kind you gravely understand you must never tell anyone ever. The kind that make your throat tighten and your palms clench to think about them.
4. **Perhaps this is why this young girl, myself, was so moved in that moment as I felt in a deep way that Something Divine saw something remarkable in this young, unlikely girl Mary.** And if that was true, then I felt in my being that that same divine force saw something remarkable in me too. All the grownups in my life might love me, but they didn't yet see it. They didn't know how much I needed to be truly seen, and cared for, and known - not for how I could sit still, or sing a solo in the church choir, or keep a family secret, but for how I loved, and hurt, and hoped for something more. **And so as this first spiritual revelation that I can remember washed over me, I wept.** First a few little tears streaming down my cheeks, and before long they were near sobs. The adults around me were bewildered. This was not the kind of church where crying was usually an expected or acceptable thing, particularly not from a kid on Christmas Eve. But I didn't care. Something deep was happening to me and that's all that mattered.

B. I share this story because it **resonates with me as I think about the conversation we've been having about Advent in various ways at Haven over the last couple of weeks.**

Advent is the season of preparation for the coming of Jesus, the time set aside classically but the church to lean into our need and longing for what the Messiah brought when he first came, and what we still need him to bring in our time. Particularly in this year with so much happening that feels dark, heavy, divisive, with extremely high stakes, and an election year coming in 2020 that is potentially going to be one of the most polarized in our lifetimes, I've invited us to engage this Advent as a **season of preparation for breakthrough**. How can we draw inspiration and instruction from those who've gone before us, and from our sacred stories, as we look for the breakthrough that is needed in our time? Today as we continue that conversation, I want to turn to this character that was at the heart of that first spiritual revelation of mine, and see what she specifically might have for all of us as we continue our season of advent, preparing for what is on our horizon. **What might this poor young girl from Nazareth have to teach us about preparing for breakthrough?**

II. The text we're going to look at today comes from the chapter of Luke. Mary has just received the word from the angel that she would bear a child, and Mary has responded that she is the Lord's servant and she accepts her role in this miraculous conception. And right after that happens we find this part of the story:

A. 39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

**46 And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."**

**56 And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.
(Luke 1:39-56, NRSV)**

B. So here is where we see how Mary, as well as her cousin Elizabeth are engaging in their preparation for breakthrough. We will spend time on the song in a moment, but before we get to it, I want to acknowledge the setting. Before Mary sings her song, she first takes a journey. What's the importance of that? I'd like to suggest that the answer to this is perhaps our first lesson from Mary on preparing for breakthrough.

1. Preparing for breakthrough means finding solidarity.

- a) If you're not familiar with the geography of this part of the world, it's not clear to you when you read the text what this journey Mary undergoes to visit Elizabeth really meant. I think for many years I casually assumed we were talking about visiting a nearby relative: I'm just gonna pop by their house and see what's up, no big deal. But this was not the case. **Here's a map** that shows the journey Mary would have had to take between Nazareth and where Elizabeth and Zechariah lived, likely the town Ein Karem, outside of Jerusalem. **It was a journey of at least three days, more likely four.** It would have been very dangerous for a young girl to travel alone as thieves regularly patrolled those roads looking for easy targets. But for some reason, Mary heads out on this dangerous excursion, her head likely full of wonder, fear, bewilderment at the reality she finds herself in.
- b) **This is life changing cataclysmic stuff that has just be revealed to her.** She's one of the only human beings in history to have a conversation with an angel for one thing, and if this wasn't all a dream, if what the angel said was true, the bizarre reality she found herself in was only going to get more bizarre. How could she possibly absorb it or believe it? Certainly she couldn't do that alone. **She needed to be with someone who might have a clue what was happening to her;** someone who wouldn't project their own fears or judgements on her story. Her parents, her finance - would they believe her story, **or would they more likely assume that if she was coming forward to tell them she was pregnant, that she had something shameful to hide?** Something that for a poor young woman in her position could even mean death as she was subjected to stoning for adultery? No, she needed to find someone else. And from what the angel had told her, her cousin all the way in Ein Karem was also expecting a miraculous baby. If anyone could relate to what Mary was going through, if anyone could confirm and affirm it, perhaps it might be her.
- c) And so this longing for recognition and understanding and confirmation in the eyes of another human being compels young Mary to undertake a dangerous journey all the way to Ein Karem, and to knock on her cousin's door. In that moment something happens. **As these two women who are taking similar unlikely and unconventional journeys encounter one another there is a moment of sacred recognition.** (show slide) There is a spiritual energy released. It is so powerful that the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. Though Mary is barely pregnant, much too early to be showing, Elizabeth prophetically understands what has compelled her young teenage cousin to come to her all the way from Nazareth. They both recognize that they are part of the same story, and **in that recognition they find solidarity.**
- d) **I don't think it's a coincidence that Mary's song comes after this moment.** She doesn't sing it after the angel departs. She doesn't sing it on the four day journey to Ein Karem. She sings it when she has found solidarity. When the thing burning in her heart is seen and understood. When the intangible and spiritual is made tangible, touchable as she puts her hands on her cousins swollen belly and feels the miracle leaping inside.

This solidarity gives space for revelation to be confirmed and voiced in powerful ways.

- e) **About five years ago, an eleven year-old girl in Sweden was at school when her teacher shared a video talking about the effects of a warming planet.** While most of her classmates watched the video about the melting icecaps and the endangered polar bears, grimaced, and then moved on, Greta Thunberg was overwhelmed. Worse, the fact that her classmates didn't share her fear and grief made her feel completely alone.
- (1) Greta became extremely depressed, unable to speak or even eat. She was hospitalized, her growth stunted by malnutrition. Later she would be diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a condition that affects how her mind processes information differently than neurotypical children. Greta describes it in this way: **"I see the world in black and white, and I don't like compromising...If I were like everyone else, I would have continued on and not seen this crisis."**
 - (2) **But Greta did see the crisis and it motivated her to action.** Inspired by the American students from Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High who in 2018 had organized schools strikes to protest gun violence in the United States, Greta decided to start a strike of her own.
 - (3) In August 2018, completely on her own, fifteen year old Greta Thunberg told her parents that **she was going to start striking from school to pressure the Swedish government to meet the demands of the Paris climate agreement.** Her parents were less than thrilled about her plan to miss school each week. She made a flyer to hand out to people describing what she was doing. It read: **"My name is Greta, I am in ninth grade, and I am school-striking for the climate... Since you adults don't give a damn about my future, I won't either."** The first Friday of her protest, August 20, 2018, she arrived completely alone in front of the Swedish Parliament with no institutional backing, no structural support, no friends to keep her company. **Just a girl in a hoodie with a sign.**
 - (4) **But Greta wasn't alone for long.** Word began to spread. The second week, a stranger joined her and Greta, who had spent years feeling so alone in her concern, felt the power of solidarity. **"That was a big step, from one to two," she recalls. "This is not about me striking; this is now us striking from school."** Each week the group grew. One to two to eight to forty. By the end of 2018, only a few months later, the Fridays for Future movement was born and tens of thousands of students across Europe were participating. A year later, by September 2019, climate strikes had spread across the globe. **Greta may have started alone but feeling solidarity with other young activists she had never met in Florida she made her own voice heard, and in so doing, called many, many other young activists forward who were looking for solidarity that brings power and ultimately, change.**

2. The second lesson Mary offers us here: Breakthrough is often identified by those most impacted by injustice.

- a) After Elizabeth speaks her blessing, it's Mary's chance to open her mouth. And when she opens it she gives voice to something powerful; something more stirring and visceral than the serene porcelain nativity doll Mary would allude to.
- b) This Mary is a singer/songwriter, a prophet, and a preacher all in one. Her speech here is the longest set of sentences uttered by a woman in the New Testament: making it, effectively, a sermon.

c) But it's a sung one. It's a worshipful and prophetic song. Tradition has named Mary's song "The Magnificat" after the Latin word from which we get "magnify". And this song tells us more about this young woman God has chosen to bear the son of the Divine than I think anywhere else in Scripture.

d) So what does it tell us about her?

(1) **First, she knows her sacred texts.** This song of hers is not simply a spontaneous worship song, it's one that is rooted in texts of the past. Her song particularly has strong echoes of Hannah, another woman who finds herself miraculously pregnant after struggling with infertility and pleading with God to grant her a child. Hannah's song of praise as she becomes the mother of Samuel provides inspiration to Mary. Her words also echo the psalms and the prophets. Clearly she knew her torah, she knew the words of the prophets. From her theological depth, some scholars surmise that it was likely Mary who taught her son Jesus the torah and passed on to him her own love of Scripture.

(2) The second thing we see is that **Mary kinesthetically understands that this breakthrough that is happening means an upheaval to all the human systems of injustice.** She gets that if she is the one that has been chosen to bear the Messiah, it means that the work of putting things right is truly coming to pass. That **God is performing a great reversal.**

(a) In Mary's day, **income inequality was at an all-time high**, and it was even more stark than our own time. In her day, the rich and powerful class was only a minuscule percentage (2-3%) of the population. The overwhelming majority of people were devastatingly poor, living at subsistence-level, in no small part due to the oppressive taxation of the wealthy 2%.

(b) **Of course the greatest symbol of this inequality was only about ten miles away from where Mary stood as she sang this song.** On a hill to the south east was a monument to a political leader who was so arrogant, so self-aggrandizing, so blatantly proud of his extreme wealth and privilege that he took to building. This leader knew how to build. His buildings were the most impressive. The tallest. The hu.....gest. Buildings that were beyond what anyone had seen before, and he was so proud of his building projects and the notoriety that they brought him that he decided to even name his most prized development project after himself. **This tower (err...this palace) was called the Herodium.** (show slide) The home of Herod. It soon on a hill prominently so that all around would see its magnificence and be intimidated by its dominating shadow. For Herod was a brutal dictator, famously paranoid, particularly in his old age. He had his own children slaughtered when he thought they might pose a political threat.

(c) **But Mary is not intimidated by this oppressive ruler and his cronies.** She understands that breakthrough means that Herod's time is coming to an end. This after all is the God who brings down the powerful from their throws and lifts up the lowly. This destitute girl who has no doubt known many hungry nights, understands that she is connected to one who has come to fill her and all who hunger with satisfying food, while those who have hoarded and squeezed the poor to fill the coffers of their own abundant stores will be sent away hungry. Justice is coming.

(d) As it turns out, Bethlehem is even closer to the Herodium than Ein Karem. It is only three miles. From Bethlehem, you look on the Eastern horizon to this view:

the palace of the king. With that in mind, **I like to imagine Mary giving birth, not serenely and modestly in her pastoral stable, but grunting and screaming defiantly with hay in her hair and a glint of determination in her eyes as she fiercely brings into life the one who will topple the monument to injustice that lays right in front of her.** This woman is a warrior for justice.

- (3) **I am far from the first to understand Mary and her song in this way.** It's for this reason that at times her song has been seen as controversial, even dangerous.
- (a) Frequently throughout history, those on the margins have heard Mary's song as their own word of hope in the face of tyranny and oppression.
 - (b) To the powerful, however, this song has been threatening.
 - (c) That's why the song was banned from being publicly read or sung in the church in different settings throughout history. As the British were trying to hang on to their rule of India, the Magnificat was banned. Later, as Guatemalans in the 1980s saw their own impoverished masses rising up, inspired in part by Mary's prophetic words, they too banned public recitations of those verses in Luke. And in the Dirty War in Argentina in the late 70s and early 80s, as women found their children disappearing, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo put up posters in the capital square with Mary's words on them, calling the junta military leadership in Argentina to also ban her song.
 - (d) Deitrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and pastor who resisted the Nazi regime in his day, and died in a death camp because of it, also took great inspiration from Mary's song. In advent of 1933, he preached this:
 - i) *"The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. 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."*
 - (e) **You don't have to live in an oppressive dictatorial regime, however, to have experienced the erasure of Mary's song. Many white evangelical churches have rarely preached it or sung it in their services.** If they do cover the song, it's usually only the first couple lines, the part where Mary is worshipful, but not "political". Contemporary worship songs adapted from the magnificat take the same liberty. Perhaps these white evangelicals don't read or sing the second half of her song because **it's too threatening to the privilege of many in their churches.** Perhaps it's **too threatening to the capitalist structures that fund those churches.** Or perhaps her gritty revolutionary spirit doesn't comport with **how they believe young women are to compose themselves** - in modesty and willingness not to lead but to follow their brothers. Whatever the reason, **the Mary that has been embraced by much of mainstream Christianity does not reflect this vital dynamic part of her character or wisdom.**
 - (f) Even the popular contemporary carol "Mary Did You Know?" revolves around a simplified understanding of the mother of Jesus. *"Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water? Mary did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?"* The whole song is based on the premise that Mary was essentially clueless, that there was no way she could know or

appreciate what she was holding in her body or in her arms. But when we look at the Magnificat we see that **clearly she knew quite a lot**. Perhaps more than anyone else at that time, she did know what really mattered about who she was carrying.

- (g) Even though I don't believe the church I was attending at age seven told this complete story of Mary either, **I think this liberating side of her was what my young heart, perhaps assisted by what I'd eventually call the Holy Spirit, was captivated by that first time I cried in church. And it is the kind of clarion call to breakthrough that I believe we need to look to today.**
- (4) In our own time, as we recognize the toxicity, darkness, and injustice in our day, and as we look to the election year to come and the new decade that will dawn with it, **I wonder if Mary's story might not be an important reminder for us.** If breakthrough that topples unjust systems is to come in our time, **it likely won't first be identified by the ones in power.** It won't be seen by the rich or politically connected. **It is likely going to come from unlikely sources who can call out what those with more advantage are unable or unwilling to see.**
- (5) **Mary will likely not be a candidate for president.** The prophetic voices on the margins who we need to hear from in this time **will probably not be the people commanding the most attention on cable news.** But as we get more involved in the campaign to come, perhaps those of us who are also privileged **need to be on the lookout for where are the prophetic voices in our time, and who on our ballots, who that we march for and with, which of our leaders are also looking for and listening to marginalized, recognizing that their concerns are all of our concerns and that they just might be the bearers of the breakthrough we all need.** Can we, like Elizabeth, attend to the the prophetic among us? Can we find leaders who are committed to the same? Who, like Mary's cousin, when encountering the presence of today's clarion call will honor it and follow it, even when it appears in an unlikely package like a poor, young virgin or a small Swedish climate-striker? This is what I will be praying for and looking to discern as the year plays out.
- 3. Third Lesson from Mary: Joy in the midst of oppression can be a subversive act of resistance.**
- a) **Both Mary and Elizabeth here know that their lot is not made miraculously easy with their present change of circumstances.** There's no child tax credit available to them or paid family leave. Their circumstances are precarious. Elizabeth is an elderly woman married to an elderly man. It's reasonable for them to wonder if they will be around long enough to see this child reach adulthood. Mary is a poor unwed mother in a patriarchal culture who is carrying a baby that threatens the powerful, and indeed before long she'd find herself fleeing with her new child the tyrant living mere miles away.
- b) And yet these women living through dark and dangerous times rejoice. Because **evil has not won. It will not steal their joy. Poverty has not won. It will not steal their joy. Herod has not won! He will not steal their joy. (Even when he tweets! He cannot take away their joy!!)** These women have experienced genuine good. They have encountered the Something Divine in the universe that saw something remarkable

in each of them and has moved with them, through them, **for them**. And so even in the midst of darkness, they feel deep, abiding joy. Joy that resists.

- c) Author and Theologian Henry Nouwen says this, “Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing - sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death - can take that love away.” This is what Elizabeth and Mary rejoiced in *Ein Karem* all those centuries ago. This is the joy I tasted for the first time as a seven year old girl on Christmas Eve. And this is the joy I believe all of us are invited to experience and live into in the year to come and beyond. Amen.

As we end, we’re gonna do something different than normal as a moment of meditative response. This week I discovered a rewrite by a female pastor of that somewhat problematic carol. It’s a version that gives Mary the credit she’s due, and invites all of us to continue to reflect on her song and its lessons in our time as we also long for breakthrough. Moment of Musical Mediation. Listen if you like. Close your eyes, or sing along. I also have an image on the screen for you to meditate on. An art piece by a contemporary artist Ben Wildflower who was similarly inspired by the Magnificat. So let’s let this be our musical mediation and a moment to allow Mary’s words to resonate.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation:

1. What role has solidarity played in breakthroughs in your life?
2. Who do you resonate more with in this story personally: Mary or Elizabeth? Are there parts of you that resonate with both? Or neither? Why might that be?
3. What does experiencing joy as a “subversive act of resistance” mean to you?