**Micah 5:2-5a**

2 But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel.

4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth;

5 and he shall be the one of peace.

**Luke 1:46-55**

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."

**Luke 1:39-45**

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."

**Sermon** There is something about Mary

May I have a minute to address the ladies present here today? Guys, I still love you, but since you aren’t generally called mothers, just bear with me for a minute… So, ladies – what are the words that you would use to describe yourself as a mother; or the words others would use? Even just the words used to describe you as a woman?

Have you ever considered any of these words – “yon virgin”, “virgin mother kind”, “mother mild”, “gentle” or vulnerable? These are the words we use to describe Mary, in most of the carols we sing, like “Silent Night”, “Once in Royal David’s City” or “In the Bleak Midwinter”. She is usually portrayed as a pleasant and compliant figure rather than a defiant one. Even artists through the ages depicted Mary in this way – meek, mild, gentle, young and vulnerable. Just as we think of the Christmas story of a cute little baby, with mother and father standing proudly by as sheep and cows sniff gently at the manger in which he lies, covered in swaddling clothes, on the verge of bursting into song like in a good Hollywood musical.

The Magnificat, however, paints a different image of Mary, the mother of God. So do her connections to other blessed among women in the Bible. Hannah, yes, the woman once so overcome with grief in the temple that Eli thought her drunk, holds her son Samuel and sings about laughing at her rivals, praising God for blasting enemies out of the sky and leaving them in a burning heap. Nothing meek or mild or gentle here. But Mary is also in line with Jael and Judith. They, too, are called blessed among women, and not for being mild, gentle and vulnerable.

So, Christmas is not a placid and harmless happening either; it is not safe. And the reason has nothing to do with traffic hazards around the malls, harmful toys for children, or the possibility of Christmas tree fires. Christmas is not safe because the Christ Child is not safe. He came not only as a promise but as a threat. Most of us have gotten so comfortable with Christmas because we have not seen Christ’s coming as a threat as well as a promise. But Mary saw it, and it made her sing.

We are rarely provided a glimpse of a Mary who has a vision of a revolutionary world sparkling in her eyes, or a passion for justice throbbing in her heart. But that is the Mary of the Bible. A teenage girl, living in an occupied territory, pregnant before the dowry is paid in full, is not supposed to hope these hopes, maybe any hopes – at least not admit them. She was no priest or politician. She had no political power or apparent wealth. She should be in hiding – hiding that baby belly. She should not be spouting off revolutionary ideas in song or poetry…

Tradition tells us that Mary is only thirteen or fourteen years old when the angel Gabriel appears to her. In her cultural and religious context, her pregnancy is a scandal. I can only begin to imagine the questions that are twirling through her mind: Is Joseph going to stick around? Will my parents still love me? How will I survive the pain of childbirth? Who will help me when my time comes to deliver? Who will support this baby if my fiancé bails? Who am I to raise the son of God? Is any of this for real, or am I losing my mind? Still, her song is a victory song even when she is not supposed to look at her situation as a victory – certainly not God’s victory. The Law allowed for her stoning – because of her visible infidelity. Her situation was as unprecedented as it was unbelievable.

And yet, amid all these questions, while hastily making her way to her cousin, she receives a blessing from Elizabeth: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." My guess is, Mary carries Elizabeth's blessing in her heart for the rest of her life. After all, her vocation as Jesus's mother is not easy. It leads her straight from scandal to danger to trauma to devastation. How blessed can she feel when she delivers her firstborn in a smelly stable? When she becomes a refugee, fleeing to Egypt to prevent her son's murder? What does blessing feel like for her years later, when her miraculously conceived child is arrested? Beaten? Mocked? Killed?

Maybe Mary is the last person one might expect to sing her song. She is a woman in a man’s world. She is a teen where adults hold all the power and influence. She is a rural Palestinian Jew in the Roman Empire. An Empire where Herod the Great was reigning over Judea with burdensome taxes that built the temple and supported Herod's lifestyle but also cost the poor their land, concentrating wealth at the very top and leaving the masses impoverished.

She was a revolutionary in a culture that crucified revolutionaries. I have no idea how she got away with this: God has shown strength with his arm; He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes the Magnificat this way: "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."

Mary declares a victory of which there is no proof. She imagines a different world. She promises an overthrow of the social order, the end of the Empire, upheaval. She is praying for the coming of the Kingdom of God – which is like praying for a revolution. She is trusting in the victory of the Messiah – which is like treason. A teenage girl. A child with child.

She dreamed the dreams of her ancestors. She sang the Songs of Hannah – victory songs. She saw the hope of the prophets – poets who dared dream in hopeless times. She saw the future of God through the fog of reality and ran into the fog with an abandon that might be considered reckless if not for her faith in the promises of God.

Teenage Mary: her words are dangerous. They are threat. Still a threat, Mary’s Song was more recently banned at various times in Guatemala, Argentina, India, by powerful rulers who had no interest in being brought down from their thrones, who were afraid people might hear this song and take it seriously. Frankly, if people, if Christians, really did take Mary’s Song seriously, it might be banned in more places.

The Lord, the Holy One of Israel, chooses ordinary Mary through whom to do extraordinary things. This is the God of reversals, the one who regularly shows up where we least expect God to be -- manger, cross, vulnerability, suffering -- in order to scatter the proud, exalt the lowly, satisfy the hungry, and send the rich away empty. Mary's God is a God of justice and compassion, the One who hears the cry of the oppressed and despondent of all generations and responds, and so also deserves our attention.

The hope has always been that the Messiah would come and make things right. That was the hope of the prophets: justice, peace, righteousness. That is Mary’s hope: justice, peace, righteousness. It is the hope that ends up on Christmas cards and in Christmas specials. And it ends up in our hearts as a cry for which we may want for our world: justice, peace, righteousness.

Mary was a rock star. A pregnant teenage rock star. Mary issues the challenge that continues to ring in our ears. It is bold, dangerous, defiant, revolutionary: and she sings it. And we like to think she is so meek and mild.

Mary’s Song threatens the society with which we are comfortable; in which we are comfortable. We know our world, our society is full of injustice, is obsessed with violence, finds righteousness to be a liability. Injustice, violence and moral ambiguity has actually been a pretty solid business model throughout human history. Homelessness, underemployment, and economic instability must provoke an uneasy conscience. And, as long as millions of children go to bed hungry or homeless or afraid each night, there are tables to be turned, that is, if we're going to mean what we sing in this year's Christmas carols.

Mary sang because she knew that the child she was to bear would change the world. When and how it would change, she did not know. But heart by heart, life by life, community by community, the change comes. Wouldn't it be something - a miracle, in fact - if our Christmas dreaming led us to begin the new year with a new vision for our world, one of generosity and abundance, justice and righteousness? May we, like Mary, trust that God is coming to save and free us. May we, like Mary, give thanks that God has taken away our shame and then respond to God’s love by welcoming the shameful. May we, like Mary, become a community that supports each other as we hope and wait. May we, like Mary, stand up and sing in defiance of a world gone of the tracks, and work towards the dream we all dream together.