

Call to Worship

Sing songs of hope into the waiting air and begin the dance of joy, for the life of faith is before us.
Look into the distance and see the rising dawn with shining rays like acts of love and warming brightness from the heart of God.

Let us sing praises to God and watch for Christ,
for in the longing of Advent lies the promise of good that is to come.

Prayer of Invocation

Send your spirit upon us, O Lord God. Come and dwell with us. Help us to center our attention on you. Give us the eyes of faith to see you in the activities of this season In these moments of worship we ask you to meet us with your grace and draw us toward you. Speak to us today through words and symbols, songs and prayers, acts of giving and receiving. Fill us with the light of Christ and draw us together into your presence. In his name we pray. Amen.

The Word

Luke 1:46-55

Common English Bible

Mary said, "With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.

He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.

Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored because the mighty one has done great things for me.

Holy is his name.

He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God. He has shown strength with his arm.

He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.

He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

Living the Word

Up until a few years ago, I would play a little game with the Confirmation Class before Advent began. I have them sit in four small groups and answer four questions. The questions seem like they come from their health class curriculum at school, but I had a purpose in asking them.

Number one: You are pregnant and you are not sure how it happened, what are you going to do? Number

two: Your best friend tells you she is pregnant, but won't reveal the father's name to you What do you do?

Number three: Your girlfriend tells you she is pregnant and you know it is not your child. What do you do?

Number four: Your daughter comes to you to tell you she is pregnant, but she won't give you the father's name. What do you do?

After much giggling and rolling of eyes, they settle into some varied answers. The boys, when told they were pregnant, were sure that the answer was an alien invasion. After good discussion in each group, including most of them deciding to stand by their friend, girlfriend or daughter, I would then invite them to turn to Mary's story in Luke and Joseph's responses in the book of Matthew.

I would then explain to them that Mary, was from a poor family and was thought to be about age 14 when she became 'with child,' which was not so unusual an age for that day, but I tell them that she could have

been stoned as an unwed mother. The following week I have them watch the movie "The Nativity Story" which gives perspective of that place and time to the story. If you haven't seen the movie, I have a copy available and would recommend it as you prepare for Advent this season.

Soon after the angel Gabriel announced to Mary the astonishing news that she would bear the long-awaited Messiah, Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was also expecting a child. As Mary greeted Elizabeth, the child in Elizabeth's womb (John the Baptist) leaped inside her. Elizabeth exclaimed to Mary, "God has blessed you among all women. Why do I have this honor that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

Mary responded by singing a song of praise to God, commonly known as the Magnificat. Her song, recorded in Luke 1:46-55, was not a sweet lullaby sung in anticipation of the baby Jesus' birth. Instead, it was a message of deliverance and hope for the people of Israel in that day and also for us today and every Christmas Season if we allow it to be.

When God moves in the life of the world everything changes. The way we have always done things is changed, and replaced by a new ordering of life. The old is gone, something new is here and things are never the same again. Mary's song of praise in reaction to her pregnancy and awareness are an expression of hope in a powerful God of Israel taking action.

God's promise to Israel from the past is now coming to fruit, through the long awaited Messiah; and she has been given the honor to bear that child. Mary is singing with words of revolution, which means to turn around. Her song becomes a testimony of her understanding of the great 'turning around' that is beginning to happen for the people. Mary, who was as unlikely a revolutionary as she was unlikely to be chosen as the mother of God. Rather than being concerned about her status or role in this life drama, Mary has embraced it with joy and honor. Her internal comprehension of what God has done, calls her to worship.

Many of you know the bright spirit that flows from Pegi Fleming. As you see her coming, she is smiling and ready to build up the people around her with her positive attitude. Like all of us, her life isn't all rosy, but she rises above most of it because she continues to cultivate fruits of the Spirit: Love, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Forbearance, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-control and particularly Joy.

She stopped by the office recently, not looking at all joyful and shared that one of her co-workers had died unexpectedly the night before. As with most of us the news had put her mind in shock. After some hugs and offers of prayer, she turned and said "Now he will get to spend Christmas with Jesus." It was like God's revelation to me as I pondered those words over and over.

Not that Jesus celebrates his birthday on December 25 like we do, but that all the company of heaven must watch with awe as we come together to anticipate and worship the Christ child's birth as we understand it. I look forward to that myself some day, to be with Jesus and enjoy the view.

Thank you Pegi for staying your heart on God, even in the midst of the difficulties of human life... and for sharing that wonderful thought this season.

Yet will we hear the whole message of Mary's Song? There is good news for the poor and the downtrodden, which becomes very bad news for those who have misused the powers and knowledge that they have been given. *"He has pulled the powerful down and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed."*

What about the other songs we sing this day of Advent?

#203 Hail to the Lord's Anointed

James Montgomery followed in the footsteps of two poetic achievers—Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley.

Montgomery's father was a minister, and his parents later served as missionaries to the West Indies. James remained in England and was raised from age 6 in a boy's boarding school administered by Moravian Brethren. Montgomery later said, "There, whatever we did was done in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ, whom we were taught to regard in the amiable and endearing light of a friend and brother."

He began writing poetry at age 10, inspired by the hymn of the Moravians, the same group that inspired John Wesley. Despite flunking out of school at age 14, Montgomery found a job in 1792 at a radical weekly newspaper, the *Sheffield Register*. He assumed the leadership of the paper not long after, when the previous editor fled the country fearing persecution for his politics. Montgomery served for 31 years as editor, during which he was a tireless supporter of social justice. He was jailed twice for his radical views, using the time in prison to write poetry.

This hymn is a paraphrase of Psalm 72 written in 1821 for a Christmas leaflet. Montgomery's closing line of the final stanza, "that name to us is love," reminds us of one of Charles Wesley's closing lines "thy name is love." For Montgomery, the world had been struggling long and hard with sin and oppression, a world that could (and can) only be redeemed by the one whose name is Love.

"*great David's greater Son!*" The genealogy of Jesus is described in two passages of the Gospels: Luke 3:23–38 and Matthew 1:1–17. Matthew's genealogy commences with Abraham and then from King David's son Solomon follows the legal line of the kings through Jeconiah, the king whose descendants were cursed, to Joseph, legal father of Jesus. Luke gives a different genealogy going back to Adam, through a minor son of David, Nathan and apparently again to Joseph.

Both gospels state that Jesus was begotten not by Joseph, but by God, being born to Mary through a virgin birth. Of course even though the lineage was very important during Jesus time, it was only the line of the males that were recorded. Aside from a general implication of her Davidic origin, there is no explicit Biblical record of Mary's genealogy.

"*to break oppression, to set the captive free; to take away transgression, and rule in equity.*" Again we hear words of revolution against the status quo. Of course only God, through Jesus can take away our transgressions; and though we would like all presidents and kings to rule in equity – seeing everyone as equal and due an equal part, human strength of character has proven unable to handle that kind of power. Communism could work, but is always corrupted by those who wield the power and see themselves above an equal order of people.

"*to help the poor and needy, and bid the weak be strong;*" Jesus came to help those in need, to encourage the weak and to give them ways to express their feelings – "*to give them songs for sighing.*" Once again the promises of God are present: "*the tide of time shall never his covenant remove;*"

#209 Blessed be the God of Israel

This hymn is a paraphrase of the Song of Zechariah, Luke 1:68-79. Michael Perry was born in Kent, England on 8 March 1942. It was during his student days at Oak Hill Theological College in 1964 that he wrote his best-known hymn, the Calypso Carol, the first line of which is "See him lying on a bed of straw". He wrote this for a college concert, and it only became famous by accident when Cliff Richard substituted it for a missing recording in a radio show.

After ordination in the Church of England, the Perry's moved to Bitterne, Southampton, where Michael was curate (a priest of the lowest rank whose job is to help the vicar) and then vicar (a priest in the Church of England who is in charge of a church and the religious needs of people in a particular area). During his time at Bitterne he was on the committees that produced the popular British hymn books *Psalm Praise* in 1973 and *Hymns for Today's Church* in 1982.

"*Blessed be the God of Israel, who comes to set us free... visits and redeems us, and grants us liberty.*" Once again we hear the words of God's wish for us to be released by whatever holds us, through Christ; along with the promise again for God's peace in our lives.

Verse two also includes the lineage "from the house of David" and ends with a reference to John the Baptist who was Jesus cousin, born to Elizabeth, only months before Jesus, and who prepared the way for Jesus with the people of that day. There is a word you may not be familiar with "harbinger" – (said with a soft g sound).

The hymn says that John was the 'harbinger' of day which means "someone that shows that something is going to happen soon."

So the Advent message is one of justifying Jesus as a part of the original family of Israel, reemphasizing God's promises from the past and revolution or a time to change through Jesus. Our last hymn this morning is more of a Christmas hymn than an Advent one.

#242 Love came Down at Christmas

It is a Christmas poem by Christina Rossetti. It was first published without a title in 1885. It was later included in the collection *Verses* in 1893 under the title "Christmastide".

The poem has been set to music as a Christmas carol by many composers but we will sing it to the traditional Irish melody "Gartan". This tune was written as "Gartan Mother's Lullaby" and is an old Irish song with a poem about a mother, from the parish of Gartan in County Donegal, to her child. Rossetti's poem is "simple, direct and sincere" and it is a rare example of a carol which has overcome the disadvantage of "not having a tune of its own, yet which has caught the imagination of holiday audiences."

She was an English poet who wrote a variety of romantic, devotional, and children's poems. She is perhaps best known to us for the Christmas carol *In the Bleak Midwinter*, another Christmas hymn, which colors the world as cold and hard and dark, until Jesus was born. Christina Rossetti was born in London, in the year 1830. Christina, the youngest, was a lively child. She dictated her first story to her mother before she had learned to write. She was educated at home by her mother, who had her study religious works, classics, fairy tales and novels.

In the 1840s, her family faced severe financial difficulties due to the deterioration of her father's physical and mental health. In 1843, he was diagnosed with persistent bronchitis, possibly tuberculosis, and faced losing his sight. He gave up his teaching post at King's College and though he lived another 11 years, he suffered from depression and was never physically well again.

Rossetti's mother began teaching in order to keep the family out of poverty. Christina's life at home became one of increasing isolation and when she was 14, Rossetti suffered a nervous breakdown and left school. Bouts of depression and related illness followed. During this period she, her mother, and her sister became deeply interested in the Church of England. Religious devotion came to play a major role in Rossetti's life.

Rossetti is honored with a feast day on the liturgical calendar of the Episcopal Church in the USA on April 27. Advent and Christmas, are about more than the love we share with those who are close to us. IT is a time to remind ourselves what it means to be Christians. Mary's song was very radical for her time and place. Because of the political climate of her day, if she had indeed sung it publically, she may have been executed, as Jesus eventually was for his radical beliefs and changes.

Today we can speak it and sing it, but do we believe it? Or are we stuck in an understanding that the rich get richer and the poor just get poorer? If so then we need a turning around in our thoughts, a new revolution. God's power is still at work today through us and we are called to 'think greater' as the people of God.

The Lord's work means the coming of a new heaven and a new earth. To live on earth in history and in anticipation of fulfillment of God's promise, is the great challenge of faith. This birth is a visible message, that was and is able to be touched and held, of God's love coming forth for us. As Mary said: "*just as he promised our ancestors, to Abraham and Abraham's descendants forever.*" Mary's song proclaimed deliverance and hope to a dark and fearful world. It continues to bring challenge and hope to us today.