

Today's passage may be familiar to many. It's Mary's song and it's called "The Magnificat" from the Latin word for magnify. Mary's cousin Elizabeth has just remarked that the child she's carrying recognizes the hope, peace, and joy inside Mary. Elizabeth's yet unborn son, who would become John the Baptist, recognizes that Mary is expecting Jesus. When I was growing up, pregnant women said they were "expecting". It's less common today, but 'expecting' is a perfect metaphor for Advent. In this time leading up to Christmas, we are expecting Jesus.

There's a beautiful song called "Mary Did You Know" and we actually sang it in the hymn-sing last week before worship. It begins with, "Mary did you know that your little boy would someday walk on water?" and ends with, "Did you know that when you kissed your little baby, then you kissed the face of God?"

I can tell you, **yes, she did know**. The angel came to her first and for some time, Mary was the *only* one who knew. She alone knew the promise of peace, hope and love. She knew before shepherds...before kings...before Joseph. She alone had that joy inside, but she soon delivered that joy into the world.

In today's passage, she rejoices saying, essentially, 'God noticed me and God has done great things for me!' *Through me, God will do great things for the world.* That's an important point for each of us to consider. Through Mary, God brought Jesus into the world. Through you, Christ continues to live here and now, in our time. When you follow the way of Christ, through your hands and heart, God can bring good news and good works to others.

To see how Mary approached her role is really inspiring. When we meet Mary today, she is 'expecting', but she didn't **anticipate** this. She's going to bear Emmanuel into this world. That's a lot of responsibility! There's a phrase that's been bubbling up for me time and again this week. It's "Ready or not, here I come!" Ready or not. The grace with which Mary handled her circumstances can be a model for us.

Taking the long view, from our point in history, we see this pregnancy as a huge honor for Mary, but at the time, it must have been a tremendous ordeal. Think about it. She's an adolescent, unmarried, and pregnant. (Imagine what it was like even 30 or 40 years ago in this country if you were a pregnant teenager.) She has no status, no money, no power. Make no mistake, this wasn't easy for Mary. Her approach to the circumstances was brilliant and faith-filled.

She found the joy and focused on that. She also looked to the future. His mercy extends to those who respect him from generation to generation. God's grace is not just personal, it's communal and it's not just for one time and place in history, but it continues on indefinitely.

I want to introduce you to another Mary, a friend of mine from grad school in California. Mary Herczog. You may actually already know **of** her as she wrote a few travel guides for Frommer's and the Dummies series.

Mary reveled in life. She engaged fully: in food, music, experiences, and friendships. I began reading her blog after I moved back to New England. She didn't always write about travel.....

She also wrote about her cancer. The blog is called "Merry Maladies". Only someone with a hopeful attitude could put those two words together. They're posted on CancerChick.com. She didn't have a choice about her illness, but she did have a choice about how she lived with it. It took faith and courage.

On her home page, it says that this is where Mary talks about her "tribulations" with cancer. She says, "I've had it three times, so I get to talk about it. Mostly because I believe that demystifying anything is the way towards understanding and endurance. Maybe by talking about it I can make it a little less scary for you, if you have to go through it. But don't, okay?"

With humor and candor, Mary inspired countless others by sharing her experiences. She and her friend Rick took several cross-country road trips. Since Rick was HIV positive and Mary had metastatic breast cancer, they called themselves, Plucky Survivors. You can read about their trips...including the best places to eat...and the best things to see like a Bible-themed mini golf course (in Kentucky).

God can work through us. Sometimes the choices we make aren't just *about us*. Our passage today, the Magnificat (from the Latin word for magnify), has echoes of Hannah's Song in the Book of Samuel. Both Hannah and Mary praise God for miraculous pregnancies. Both male children are understood to do the work of God, though only Jesus is understood to be the actual son of God. Both Hannah and Mary praise God for overturning the societal power structures and lifting up the lowly.

Forty years ago, when my Aunt Penny got cancer, it wasn't talked about beyond "the C word". Now Today we have walks, and screenings, and entire months dedicated to talking about it so that we may educate and empower. My sister went back to work just last week after cancer surgery in May. Thank God that today we have programs and facilities and support today. The lowly are being lifted. There is hope. There is peace. There is joy. All because God so loved the world.

When you love God, you become willing to do God's will despite the cold shoulder from others, despite the personal sacrifices, and despite the heartbreak that sometimes comes with doing the right thing for God. When you love God, you love your neighbors and you're willing to share your experience to help someone who may just be beginning on the path you've already trod. When you go through things that are uncomfortable, unpopular, or even downright terrifying, but you can still find joy even in your circumstances, then you are truly living with faith!

All those years ago, God sent his son, through Mary, to this world. The hope that Jesus brought wasn't just for a future in heaven, but for practical needs right here on earth. When we embody Christ's examples, that is Christian ideals, God lives in us, too.

Despite whatever your circumstances, can you look for some joy? We may not be able to change the past, but we can certainly change the future.

A colleague, Linda McCoy tells of a little boy who was playing the role of the innkeeper in a re-enactment of the nativity story. He didn't like the fact that he was supposed to turn Mary and Joseph away, telling them there was no room for them in the inn.

When the show went on, Joseph knocked on the cardboard door of the 'inn'. The little boy playing the innkeeper couldn't hold back. He shouted loudly, "Come on in! I've been expecting you!"

Your holy homework this 3rd week of Advent is to expect Jesus, but don't just wait for him to come change the world. Realize that you can embody Christian characteristics and through you, hope, peace, and joy may be born anew. Don't just live from where you've been, focus on Jesus, rejoice, and live from the perspective of where you are headed! Blessed be and amen.