



SERMONS THAT WORK

**Advent 4
Year C**

A Song of Hope

[RCL]: Micah 5:2-5a; Canticle 15 (or 3) or Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

Liturgical seasons are worthwhile because they reflect the rhythm of life itself. Advent reflects seasons of our lives that are filled with hope and anticipation. We often associate these with happy times: waiting for a wedding, waiting for a baby to be born, or waiting for the arrival of a loved one who has been away for a long time.

But the first Christmas wasn't exactly happy and bright, and the readings of Advent itself aren't particularly happy, either. Advent speaks of awaiting God's help in the midst of desperation, reminding us that we can find echoes of Advent as clearly in the homeless shelter as in the maternity ward.

Advent calls to us in the midst of the weight on our shoulders, and it speaks hope. As we watch the news and see the pain in the world, we are faced with our own powerlessness. As snow and ice and cold weigh down the landscape of many northern climes, we too feel weighed down: by our ever-extending holiday to-do lists, by the suffering in the world, and by our own personal struggles.

Advent is here to remind us that we cannot save ourselves, but that there is yet hope.

Today, with four candles lit, the Song of Mary soars through the Gospel reading and into our hearts again, as it does every year.

Mary, the unwed mother, the fiancé of a poor carpenter. Mary, who knows depths of desperation that many of us will never have to know. Mary, who felt herself powerless but sang to God who was about to save the whole world.

We often think of Mary as gentle and meek, but today, Mary is brave and bold, singing loud and strong.

Everything — the very shape of human history — is about to change.

The new dawn is on the way, and Mary sings out to greet it. The weight lessens; hope is born.

In the first installment of the three-part series *The Hunger Games*, there is a scene in the movie that is not in the book, but it well sums up the trilogy's theme. President Snow, the dictator of the dystopian, futuristic country

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of Panem, is walking in his rose garden with the chief “game maker,” Seneca Crane. Crane is the man responsible for creating a game that pits young people from the twelve districts of Panem against one another in a highly publicized fight to the death each year. The winner of the Hunger Games is then held up as a brave, strong hero that represents the spirit of Panem.

President Snow asks Seneca Crane *why* the games *must* have a winner. If the Capitol simply wanted to show its power and to instill fear and control, he says, why not simply execute people? Why the games? Why a winner?

Seneca Crane does not understand. He stares back, confused.

“Hope,” President Snow says simply. “*Hope* is the only thing stronger than *fear*. A little hope is effective. A lot of hope is dangerous. A spark is fine, as long as it’s contained.”

A little hope, says Snow, would allow the games to entertain the people and would allow them to have a hero to root for, while also keeping the Capitol firmly in control. A lot of hope would topple Snow’s oppressive regime entirely. The books and movies, as you either know or can probably guess, are about that spark *not* being contained. The second installment of the story is called *Catching Fire* as hope — a lot of hope — is revived in the country of Panem.

Hope is more than mere optimism. A lot of hope can shake the foundations of everything that weighs us down. A lot of hope can change the course of history.

For Mary’s part, she doesn’t initially greet the news of her pregnancy with her soaring song and blazing hope. When Luke’s Gospel first introduces us to Mary, she is more like the traditional image of Mary — young, meek, seemingly timid, but ultimately faithful. When the angel tells her the news, she consents, but she’s not singing yet.

As she’s absorbing the news from the angel Gabriel that she will conceive and bear a child, he tells her, perhaps to console her: Elizabeth, your relative, is pregnant too, even in her old age!

Gabriel doesn’t actually *tell* Mary to go to Elizabeth, but Luke says she still “made haste” to go to the Judean town in the hill country to see her.

Mary wants to be near someone who understands. Elizabeth is also pregnant by a miracle. Elizabeth, Mary knows, won’t think she’s crazy. And here, with another human being who understands that God works in really weird and unexpected and direct ways, Mary is able to find the courage to sing her song of hope. Not ordinary optimism, but great hope. The kind that catches fire. The kind that sings loud.

Today, Mary sings as she invites us into the vulnerable territory of daring to hope big. Optimism looks behind us to find comfort in what we’ve experienced before. Hope — the big, world-shaking, musical hope of Mary — looks ahead, knowing that we cannot imagine what God is able to do.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with optimism. Optimism hopes for good fortune, for fun with friends and family during the holidays, for a blessed and happy new year, and for love and warmth to surround us. There is nothing wrong with a little optimistic Advent cheer.

But if you have experienced the depths of despair, if you have seen the pain that exists in the world, you know that optimism is not enough on its own. It is too difficult to sustain. The world is too broken, too violent, and too divided, and we alone cannot fix it. Our one spark of hope is that God has spoken and told us that someday, all things — *all things* — from our personal struggles to the weight of the world's pain, shall be made right. That hope is why Mary sings.

Today, the Gospel story invites us, like Mary, to seek out others in order to find our song of hope. It wasn't until Mary was with Elizabeth in the Judean hills that her hope burst into song. And maybe, whether we know it or not, that's what we've done today, too. We have made haste to seek one another out, to gather together so that we, too, can sing songs of hope.

Our song is one of extraordinary hope. Hope that has seen the broken and divided state of the world and knows that it cannot afford to hope too small because we cannot repair the world on our own. Only God can, and only God will. In the meantime, we are called to make our corner of the world that God so loves a less divided, more trustworthy, more hopeful place. We are called to sing.

The best part about Mary's song of hope is that it is never hope unfulfilled. Every year, we remember her bold song to remind ourselves that God has already broken through. Even in the darkness, even in the deepest disappointments, even when we are betrayed, and even when the world looks most broken, we keep this crazy hope alive that God has and God will break through. And today, we make haste to find each other to sing that hope again, to fan that spark into flame again.

The Reverend Joseph Peters-Mathews, an Episcopal priest in Washington State, puts it this way: "That's why I love Advent ... Jesus never *doesn't get born*. We long, hope, wait, anticipate, and we are never let down at the last minute." Every year, Christmas always arrives. Even if we are exhausted or brokenhearted, the Light of Christ always comes to the Church. Always. The final candle is always lit.

Advent and Christmas are here every year to remind us that God has *already* broken through. Despite the world's pain, the dawn is well on the way.

And that is why Mary finds Elizabeth and sings her heart out. So, let us today find one another and sing our hearts out to the God who breaks through, who sustains our lives, and who dares us to hope big — and beckons us to sing *loud*. Amen.

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