

## Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

## Sermon Reflection Notes

John Wesley's parents, Samuel and Susanna, both had great influence on his life. In his early days, John Wesley was very much like his father: by the book, academic, serious and perhaps even a bit stodgy. But as his ministry continued, Wesley's mother began to show. Susanna was born to a family of dissenters who challenged the Church of England practices, and she deeply valued personal piety. She was the one to educate the ten children at home. She was the one who took the initiative to lead prayer gatherings in their home, a practice that eventually grew to 200-300 villagers. When she drew criticism for the practice from the associate pastor and her husband, she refused to back down, saying: "If, after all this, you think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience; but send your positive command in such full and express terms as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment for neglecting this opportunity for doing good when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ." Susanna was courageous, faithful, convicted. She was a testament to women in church leadership. She stood in the shadow of Mary and claimed her space, just as Mary did before her.

During Advent we hear about John the Baptist and Jesus. And, obviously, they are central figures in the Advent story, Jesus in particular. But before John and Jesus were born, we had their mothers: Elizabeth and Mary, the prototype Advent characters.

Both women had unlikely pregnancies. Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel and was told she had found favor with God and that she was going to bear a son and name him Jesus. Mary, a young woman with full agency and control, gives permission to the angel: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." Post-menopausal Elizabeth was well past the age to bear a child as was her old husband Zechariah. When Zechariah was visited by an angel, he scoffed and rejected the idea...they were too old, he said. There was no way. Elizabeth though...Elizabeth rejoiced! She faced the future with joy; she knew and believed this was a gift from God and trusted that God was at work. When Mary arrived at Elizabeth's home, the baby Elizabeth was carrying, (John the Baptist) leapt in her womb. The women began to talk about what all of this means, for them and the world. They began to conspire. And when women in the Bible work together with strength and solidarity, great things happen.

Mary is often portrayed as a meek, gentle, demure mother who quietly and gingerly cares for her child. But if we really read what is in Luke's gospel, Mary isn't a demure woman at all. She is not a gentle observer to her Son's divine mission. She is an instigator of political revolution. She isn't singing a sweet lullaby but rather a powerful song of upheaval. She knows that her son will be part of a divine revolution, that he will turn the world upside down and inside out, and she raises a defiant fist in the air and proclaims it. Mary is a mother, but she is also a disciple and a prophet. And Elizabeth is right there with her.

On the third Sunday of Advent, we are reminded again that Mary is standing, center stage, singing for all the world to hear: "Let it be with me according to your word...for my soul magnifies the Lord." Let us sing with her. Let us sing with Elizabeth, and Susanna, and all those women who have shown us the way. Let our souls magnify the Lord!

## Singing with Mary

## Scripture

Luke 1:47-55 (NRSVUE)

My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name;<sup>50</sup> indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

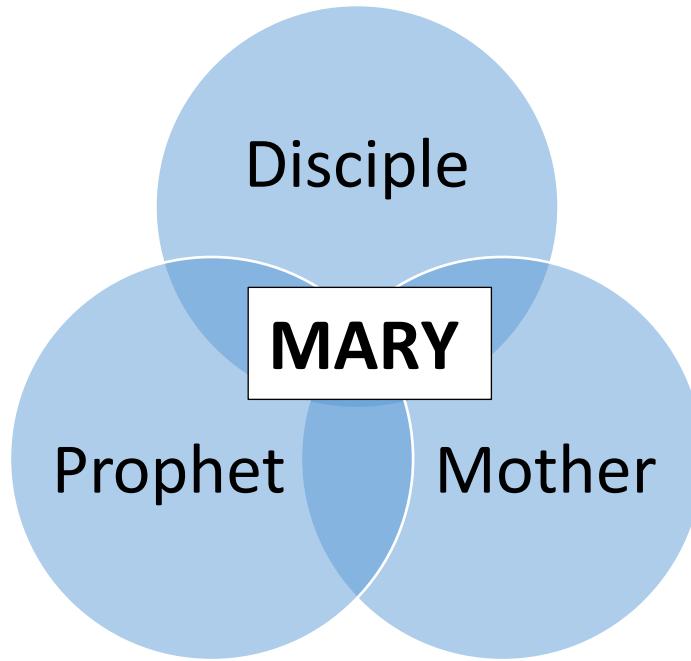
<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly;<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

<sup>54</sup> He has come to the aid of his child Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

## Discussion Questions

1. The graphic below is a visual representation of the three words Pastor Ron used to describe Mary. Let's imagine the qualities of each role, regardless of who might hold the title.



2. Mother, disciple, prophet. The graphic we chose was deliberate. Why do you think we chose this particular visual? How might it help us understand Mary and anyone else who holds those roles?
3. If you ask Google to show you a picture of Mary, you will get thousands of images of a seemingly demure, meek woman, eyes downcast, hands folded, sometimes cradling an infant Jesus. She is nearly always wearing a blue or white head covering. She nearly always looks ready to pray. And yet, that is not the woman in the scripture this week. In general, that is not the image of women in the Bible. What women in the Bible can you think of who are demure and meek and shy? What women in the Bible do not fit that role?

4. A prophecy is not a prediction. It is announcing the reality of what is. Prophets, for the most part, address the present and also refer to the past. Mary's prophecy is sung with a fist raised, defiant and proud. What is she announcing as reality? What does she bring forward from the past?
5. Mary sings a different song, one that echoes through the Bible. We echoed her words this week in the Advent hymn *Tell Out, My Soul*, verse 3: "Tell out, my soul, the greatness of God's might! Powers and dominions lay their glory by; proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight, the hungry fed, the humble lifted high." We are called to sing this same song...Hannah's song...Mary's song. How do we join the choir of voices that proclaim the greatness of God's might with fists raised, singing defiantly of the revolution that Advent brings?

## Closing Prayer

God of peace, God of justice, God of freedom: we love the quiet and beautiful Christmas hymns—and yet you call us to hear the songs of Hannah, and Elizabeth, and Mary, and Susanna. You call us to expand our vision and to dream of a reality where all have enough of what is needed for life. You call us to imagine that those who oppress will be silenced and those who have been oppressed will find their voices. You call us to come out from those places where we hide. Give us the language and the courage to proclaim the good news that you are with us. Give us the hope and the will to stand against all that is not yet right in the world. Help us to sing Mary's song with voices that are strong and full of joy. We pray in the name of Jesus, who learned his mother's song well and teaches us to sing it too. Amen.

*"My Soul Magnifies the Lord!"*