

Micah 5: 2-5a  
Hebrews 10: 5 – 10  
Luke 1: 39 – 55  
4 Advent Yr. C.

The Rev. Dr. Dennis S. Tierney  
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church  
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### **“We Call Her Blessed”**

Protestants are of mixed opinions about Mary. While many Protestant theologians give Mary pride of place as the Mother of God, the excesses of Marian shrines and the amazing collection of additional titles given to Mary, and the unusual number of feast days devoted to Mary and her life, at least four major feast days over the centuries, all make our Protestant minds a bit nervous. Consider just her honorific titles – Mary, Star of the Sea, Notre Dame, Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Walsingham, Our Lady of Fatima, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Sorrows, the Black Madonna of Poland, Our Lady of Guam, Our Lady of Cuba, Our Lady of Manaong, the list is amazing. And then there is the connection between Mary and gardens. Mary is associated with over thirty flowers – marigolds – named for Mary by way of a wonderful story of thieves trying to steal the gold, frankincense and myrrh from Mary and Joseph as they flee to Egypt, only to have yellow flowers fall out of her bag instead of gold. But there are also lilies of the valley, roses of Sharon, columbine, lavender, Madonna lilies, violets, and irises. Lastly, Mary, of all the saints of God, is the only one who has returned to humans bringing messages from God. Of the 295 apparitions thought to be Mary, the Roman Catholic Church has accepted 9 of them, the most famous being Lourdes, Rue de Bac, and La Salette, all in France, Fatima in Portugal, and Knock in Ireland. By some views, Mary has appeared on every populated continent, imploring the people to repent of their sins. No wonder they call her blessed.

So, on this final Sunday of Advent, we hear about the astonishing story that salvation begins with two unlikely and dangerous births. We read of two remarkable women, Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, and Mary, the mother of Jesus fomenting a rebellion that will change the whole world. And we do so remembering that they lived in a society where women had few rights at all. Women were property, under the complete control of their male relatives until they married and then under the complete control of their husbands. Men could divorce women but women could not end their marriage. Men could have concubines, own slaves, and largely do as they willed. Women bore almost all the restrictions of society, women always did more than half the work needed to stay alive, and women were never understood to be equal to men in those days.

And yet, without women, strong women, wise women, brave women, not much of importance would have happened in the Bible or, for that matter, in the world. Oh, men are not entirely useless; we open jars, climb to high places, and sometimes even fix things, but we should always, always, remember God’s penchant for calling upon the unlikely to do “God’s great things.”

The Magnificat is the prayer that Mary says to Elizabeth her cousin when they meet and recognize in each other the wondrous works being done through them. The Magnificat is Mary’s longest speech in the Bible. Traditionally, the church has focused on Mary’s faithful acceptance of becoming the unmarried mother of God. We often read about Mary as the model woman, meek, mild, accepting, and non-complaining; you get the picture. Paintings of the Annunciation

often show Mary in a position of kneeling, a posture of humble, grateful acceptance. But there are more modern paintings that show Mary not so certain that this offer is one she should take.

Listen again to her own words. “My soul magnifies the Lord.” “Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed.” These words do not strike me as purely humble acceptance. There is a sense of Mary’s own strength, Mary’s own faith, Mary’s own understanding that she is an essential part of God’s plan for salvation. Mary then paraphrases Old Testament prophets as proof that this inexplicable birth, dangerous as it is for Mary, will lead to peace and justice for God’s people. Mary knows her own prophetic history and reminds herself and Elizabeth that God’s work in the world leads to righteousness, to justice, and to peace. God’s efforts, as mysterious as they may appear, will lead to the righting of wrongs, the settling of injustices, the coming age of enough for all.

Both women are comforted by this recitation and the Magnificat has become one of the great prayers of the Christian Church. They go forward from this intimate time together – two pregnant women – one young and, as yet, unmarried, one too old to be bearing a child. Both are slightly fearful of the dangers and uncertainties to come; both are giddy with the wondrous possibilities inherent in new life within them. We are privy to women’s talk; the things discussed when men are not around. These are words of women of strength and character and deep purpose. These are strong women worthy to be remembered.

The whole business of bringing new life into the world is not for the weak of heart. It takes remarkable toughness to bear children into any world let alone a cruel and dangerous world. And yet, new life comes into the world every day; in good times and bad. And women, all over the world, not only bring new life into the world, they also labor to create a world worthy of new life. In so many ways, civilization flourishes because women insist on it and work on the men in their lives to make it so. So many organizations owe their start to women who gathered and decided that things needed to be done. The earliest records of Saint Barnabas show it was the women who determined that the island needed an Episcopal church and they quietly gathered, over tea or coffee, in their parlors, to plan what was to be Saint Barnabas. All over this island and in communities across this country, the origins of libraries, schools, churches, charitable organizations, museums, theatres, and many other signs of civilization are found with women of strength and character and deep purpose. And, many times, those strong women graciously allowed the men in their lives to think it was the men who made it all happen. And, in fairness, it really was both women and men working together to build up the communities in which they lived. And, sometimes women die for their country, their families, and, sometimes, women die protecting the children of others.

All generations do call Mary blessed. She is remembered; she is adored the world over. Marian shrines exist in multiple places around the world and many faith communities treasure their Mary – The Mary of Lourdes, Mary of Fatima, Mary of Guam, Mary of Guadalupe, Mary of Samoa, and on and on.

We, too, must remember that God’s ways are not our ways. God calls upon those who believe regardless of gender, age, status, wealth, or power, to bring about God’s desires for the world. God calls upon the over-looked, the unlikely, the oppressed, the poor, and the marginalized to

show the rest of creation how best to live. We are called to remember all those who, with great faith, changed so much even though they possessed no status, no power, and commanded only their own hearts and the hearts of their families. We are called to remember the women educators at Sandy Hook Elementary School who gave their lives so that other people's children might live. Rachel, Dawn, Anne Marie, Lauren, Mary, and Victoria. Their souls magnified the world and made it a better place and they inspire others to do so to this very day. This last Sunday of Advent we honor all those who, in the hour of their call, said yes to God, said no to violence and hate, and did such great things. All generations, including Mary, Queen of Sorrows, will call them blessed. Amen.