

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *Mary's Song*

SERIES: *Have A Mary Christmas*

SCRIPTURES: *Luke 1:46-55*

SPEAKER: *Shaun Kipe*

DATE: *2022 - 12 - 4*

**Credit to Scot McKnight; John Ortberg*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church this morning.

Today we're in the second week of our Christmas series called, "Have A Mary Christmas" (**Christmas Series Title Slide**). As you may recall from last week...we said that this year as we prepare for Christmas we're following the story through the fascinating journey of Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

Part of the reason we're doing this is because sometimes our thinking about Mary is a little inaccurate. When we think of Mary, we often think of comfortable, serene, manger scenes. (**Image of manger scene**). Maybe we think of "*gentle Mary...meek and mild.*" And that doesn't always portray the reality of that first Christmas. So we want to try and understand the reality of the Christmas story.

But more than that, ultimately we're approaching the story through Mary's experiences because Mary points us to Jesus.

Think about it, Mary was the first human being to accept Jesus as Lord. The Angel Gabriel's announcement to her, was that her son, was going to be Messiah and Savior of world and her courageous response, her faithful response as we learned last week was "May it be..."

This morning we want to take a look at a part of Mary's story that you may not be as familiar with...called **the Magnificat**. Which is a fancy church word simply meaning...

I. Mary's Song

We might say Mary, was the very first Christmas caroler. You see, after Mary received this astonishing news, about becoming the mother of the Messiah. She breaks into song.

But Mary's song is not like many of our favorite Christmas carols. We sing songs like **"O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie."** Or **"the little lord Jesus, no crying he makes"**...kind of makes us feel all warm and fuzzy. But Mary's song is not that kind of song. Mary's song is earth-shattering, kingdom-shaking...it is downright revolutionary when we really understand the message behind her song. Mary seems to have been fully aware of the significance of the Messiah's birth and what that means for our world.

In fact, theologian Scot McKnight, based on the powerful words of Mary's song, calls Mary...

A. Woman of justice.

Now that's not a phrase often associated with our recollection of Mary, mother of Jesus. So, you ready? Let's hear the words of Mary's song.

⁴⁶ And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”

And once again as with last week, perhaps the full impact, and revolutionary nature of Mary’s song doesn’t hit you the way that it should. So let’s try to understand a little bit of the historical context behind these words.

Keep in mind that at this time, in that world, **Herod was King** and Herod doesn’t share his power. In fact, when Herod took power as King, he had actually killed some of his very own family members in order to eliminate them as threats to his power.

Many of you are probably familiar with the phrase **Pax Romana**. It’s a phrase that comes from this time in history and it literally means **Roman Peace**. But it’s not peace like we often think of peace. Pax Romana basically meant there were no threats to Herod or his Kingdom. It meant that Herod had managed to obliterate his enemies and enslave the populace. To control the weak and the marginalized. And if there ever appeared a threat to Herod’s power he would do everything possible to squelch it.

In fact, if you’re familiar with the Christmas story, you’ll know how true this is. Just a couple of years after Mary sang this song, we’re told that **Magi** from the East, came in search of baby Jesus. And they informed Herod, that a baby had been born...to become the new king. Herod’s response was nothing less than mass child genocide and murder...killing all children two years old and under in the village of Bethlehem.

In Herod’s Kingdom there is one King...and it’s him!

So with that context in mind...try to hear Mary's words again, but this time from Herod's perspective. Through the birth of Jesus...

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."

Mary's words are an announcement, a voice from the bottom of society, that true justice has finally arrived on earth for all of the weak, marginalized, disadvantaged, the enslaved in Herod's Kingdom.

Mary is singing that Herod is about to be displaced and replaced by her son the new Messiah, as God promised. Mary basically says, *"Not for long Herod. When my son grows up, he's taking your place."* To the listeners in Mary's world her words meant that Herod's Kingdom was about to be overthrown.

"When Mary declared that God 'has brought down rulers from their thrones,' anyone listening at the time would have heard implications for Herod the Great and Rome. When she announced that God has 'sent the rich away empty,' hearers would have immediately thought of Herod the Great and those benefiting from heavy taxation. When she proclaimed that God 'has lifted up the humble' and 'has filled the hungry with good things,' Mary's listeners would have turned their attention to the poor people like Mary herself. Had Mary sung this song in Nazareth among the peasants they would have all hoisted a toast and shouted 'Hallelujah!' and 'Amen!'"

Herod's days of taxing Israel, flaunting her laws, and dotting Israel's landscape with pagan shrines were numbered. Mary was already announcing justice as fact."

(McKnight pg. 18)

I told you this is revolutionary language. Mary understood the significance of the Angel's proclamation that her son was going to be Messiah and Lord. Mary's song teaches us that in Jesus, the baby born in the manger, God is cracking the heavens wide open and descending into the world to establish justice and rout unjust Kingdoms!

This is not your typical "how still we see the lie" kind of lyrics. This is the kind of song that leaves those who are rich and powerful in this world feeling a little bit uncomfortable...that includes many of us in this room.

This is the kind of song that can get you into trouble...land you in jail.

Mary's song has such a powerful message it's reported that, through the years, several governments have banned the recitation of the Magnificat because they feared being overthrown by the populace.

Here's one description of this:

***In India**, during the British rule of India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being sung in church. In the 1980s, **in Guatemala**, the government determined Mary's words about God's love for the poor to be too dangerous and revolutionary. The song had been creating quite the stirring amongst Guatemala's impoverished masses. Mary's words were inspiring the Guatemalan poor to believe that change was indeed possible. Thus, their government banned any public recitation of Mary's words. Similarly, **in Argentina**, after the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo—whose children all disappeared during the Dirty War—placed the Magnificat's words on posters throughout the capital plaza, the military of Argentina outlawed any public display of Mary's song. (Enemylove.com)*

The message was considered too empowering; emancipating all who felt crushed, defeated, and powerless. Governments, nations, places of power feared people would

begin to realize that true change and justice happens through ordinary people doing ordinary things.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized the revolutionary nature of Mary's song. Before being executed by the Nazis, Bonhoeffer spoke these words in a sermon during Advent 1933:

The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings...This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind".

Now I know that words like **justice** and **social justice** carry a lot of baggage in our world today. So much so that sometimes, we Christians, can overlook or ignore the crucial meaning behind those words. In fact, since we come from the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world, I sometimes wonder if Mary's song and concepts like justice and social justice make us uncomfortable.

We don't want to know. We don't want to see. We don't want anybody to tell us about human misery and injustice. We just get used to it—like you get used to wearing your watch or you get used to the stuff you haven't fixed around the house. After awhile, you just don't notice anymore. But Mary doesn't let us off the hook, her words are penetrating and convicting.

So let's just talk for a moment about...

B. Why justice matters?

Justice is God's word. We should define it, understand it, live it according to His definition.

In fact this word justice is closely related to our advent theme for today...PEACE!

The true heart of Biblical justice can be found in the Hebrew word for peace, called “Shalom”. The concept is found all throughout your Bible and the heart of shalom is not just about people not fighting...the heart of shalom has a much more wholistic view in mind.

One way to define true justice is **“God’s wholeness”**. *Justice is a comprehensive reality that involves every area of life and is what Jesus meant by “abundant life”. Abundant, flourishing, thriving life for people and communities as defined by the story of Scripture where what has been broken because of sin is restored, renewed, and reconciled by God in Christ. That is shalom, and the presence of shalom means that justice has taken root in the world.”* (Gustine)

It is when all is right in the world. All people have food to eat. All people have clothes to wear and shelter to live in. Communities and individuals live in safety, security and are harmony with one another. Conflict is resolved not through weapons and violence and selfish accumulation but through conversation, relationships and generous sharing. Health care and medicine is available to all people. The voices of the weak and the marginalized are not overlooked or ignored.

The Romans claimed to bring peace and justice, to the world. But in Rome justice was reserved for a select few. Only Romans, and mostly elite, citizens of the empire, wealthy, educated. This is limited justice, partial justice, **selective** and comfortable **justice**.

Kind of like the justice we so often experience in our world. For me, for people that look like me, justice for people who think like me, talk like me, get along with me.

And in fact, the Jews were looking for this kind of selective, limited justice as well. A savior who would come and offer justice to the Jews at the expense of the gentiles. Which is why God kept sending his messengers...the prophets all throughout the Old Testament...to remind Israel and call Israel, his people to higher level of justice. Justice according to God's standards. It's all over the prophetic teaching...

Amos said, "**Hear this word, you cows of Bashan ... who oppress the poor and crush the needy**" (Amos 4:1). He calls them cows for not living according to God's vision of justice for all. Cows of Bashan is not a term of endearment.

Isaiah, writing about the coming of the Messiah, writes - 42 **"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations...In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth."**

Micah 3 one of the more gruesome descriptions of how God feels about injustice, speaking to the leaders of Israel he says **"Should you not know justice, you who hate good and love evil—who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones, who eat my people's flesh, strip off their skin, break their bones in pieces, chop them up like meat for the pan?"**

This is an image of how God sees injustice. It's inhumane when God's wholeness is not imparted to all people. And you see, this is why justice on earth was the sign of God's Messiah, Mary's son.

When John the Baptist was wondering if Jesus was the Messiah listen to what Jesus says:

² When John the Baptist was in prison, he heard what Jesus was doing. He sent his followers. ³ They asked, "Are You the One Who was to come, or should we look for another?" ⁴ Jesus said to them, "Go and tell John what you see and

hear. ⁵ The blind are made to see. Those who could not walk are walking. Those who have had bad skin diseases are healed. Those who could not hear are hearing. The dead are raised up to life and the Good News is preached to poor people.

Justice in our world, for all people, should matter to us, because it mattered to God. It was the sign of the Messiah. This means that for God's people...

C. Justice demands action.

How do we respond to injustice? What should we do? Should we just be paralyzed by the immensity of injustice in this world? Should we just sit around doing nothing but feeling intense guilt because of our own complicity in it?

The Prophet Micah sums up the response God is looking for. If you grasp this, you grasp *the* heart of Mary's song. Micah 6:6-8 (RSV):

"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams? With ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

Notice the escalation in the text. Everyone could afford burnt offerings. Not many could afford a calf that is a year old. As for a thousand rams, only the king could offer that. Ten thousand rivers of oil are well beyond what anybody could do. The sacrifice of a firstborn child is a pagan ritual that surrounded Israelite culture. Is that what God wants? No. (John Ortberg)

"He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God"

Micah says: You can pretend and act confused about what God wants. And you can get all spiritual about what God wants...but he has shown you. From the very beginning, God has been quite clear about what he wants.

God's plan for your life is not simply to get a good job, work hard, make lots of money, go to church each week, read your Bible every once in a while, say a prayer, take nice vacations, and then retire.

Listen carefully, I'm not saying you shouldn't get a job or make money or plan for retirement...I'm just saying, when you read Mary's song, when you believe Mary's song...it means that there's more to life than just your comfort and retirement.

We live in a world where injustice, large and small, goes on everyday, everywhere and the call of God's people is to stand up and do something about it.

It's amazing and humbling to me how simple and yet powerful are the minds of little children. Just a few weeks ago when I was working on this sermon. I was at home, in the evening, watching the news. And Keagan, our 8 year-old son, was in the living room with me, shooting hoops on one of those little indoor nerf basketball hoops. I didn't really even realize he was listening to the news.

The first story that came on was about how **Google** had just lost a major lawsuit related to how they are tracking users' locations. And that the state of Pennsylvania will receive **\$19.7 millions** dollars from Google as part of the payout in this suit.

Then the next story came on and it was about efforts that **UNICEF** is putting forth **in East Africa** to help feed starving children due to severe draught in the area.

The story was about dried up riverbeds in Northern Kenya, where over 2,000 migrant wonderers live. They were formerly farmers on the land, but the riverbeds are all

drying up. Today they spend their days, sifting through sand, trying to find pieces of gold. Usually gold is discovered as a tiny speck in the sand and takes about 5 days of sifting to get one speck of gold. That gold is enough to buy food to barely keep them alive for the next week and each day the process repeats itself.

The news report finished with these words... **“These people aren’t trying to get rich, they’re just trying to eat.”**

The words of the prophets came ringing back in my ears. “You cows of bashan, who oppress the poor and crush the needy.” And “what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice!”

Like I said I didn’t know Keagan was paying attention. As the story was finishing up, I looked over at Keagan, he was now glued to the TV. He then asked a very simple but I thought profound question...he asked: *“Dad, we live in Pennsylvania right? Why can’t we take the 19 million dollars from Google and give it to those families in Kenya who starving?”*

I guess, I didn’t really have a good answer. The best answer I had was: *“That’s not really how the world works. It’s much more complicated than that.”* But then I thought, why isn’t that how the world works?” Jesus often said profound things very simply that challenge the wealthy and powerful: **“if someone is hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty give them a drink. If someone is naked, give clothes. If someone is in prison, go visit them.”**

This is justice, this is God’s wholeness...peace on earth. This is what Mary’s song was all about at Christmas time.

And, I guess, I shouldn’t expect the world, who doesn’t believe in the Messiah to have a heart of justice. But I should expect all those people who follow Jesus, all those churches celebrating advent and the Christmas season this year to think long and

hard about what it really means to celebrate Jesus' birth and what justice on earth for all people looks like.

Mary understood that the birth of Jesus meant justice on earth, for all people. Micah says this is what God requires of you: Do justice. Be an agent of justice.

Can I share kind of another neat story with you?

Just a couple of weeks ago, we received at the church, an email from a former student in our youth ministry here at Five Forks. Her name is **Sydney Robertson (PIC)**. I asked her if I could share part of her story with you all, and she graciously agreed. She has been going to school out at the University of Pittsburgh, studying engineering.

She emailed us asking for some financial assistance for a trip she is taking at the beginning of the new year. Here's what she says,

I am graduating from University of Pittsburgh in December with a degree in Environmental Engineering! I have not attended Five Forks much since moving to Pittsburgh, but Five Forks' youth group has been pivotal in my relationship with Christ.

Christ has clearly given me a desire to use my degree to help others in developing countries, and I am so excited that I have the opportunity to do just that in Cambodia alongside EMI from January to May 2023. This desire has been placed on my heart ever since attending a week long mission trip to Belize in 2016 with Five Forks!

EMI stands for Engineering Ministries International and is a Christian non-profit that has offices all over the world. I'm headed to their office in Cambodia where I will be mostly designing water and sanitation systems. I would really love for you to join this ministry with me as I prepare to serve in Cambodia.

My dad, Pastor Ray is the one who received the email. We both got teary-eyed as he read Sydney's email. Sydney caught the vision of Mary's song. Sydney caught the Messiah's vision for justice for all, including the poorest of the poor in Cambodia. And Sydney decided she's doing something about it. She's taking action. Isn't that fantastic!

You can't correct all the injustice in our world, and you probably aren't going to join EMI...but justice demands we do something.

In fact, in my conversation with Keagan. I told him, I said, "We probably can't get the state of PA to give 19 million dollars to those folks in Kenya. But I said, how about this, would you be willing to take the \$ from one of your Christmas gifts this year and we'll use it to help someone in need?" And he was all about that.

You can start to notice. You can read. You can study. You can be thoughtful about what's going on in this world. You can pay attention to which governments and companies are being just and which are not. You can pray. You can ask God to help you treat others fairly. You can at least have the courage to stand up for people who are getting treated unfairly in your little world—in your school, your office, your neighborhood, and your home. You, who have so much more than you need, so much more than you deserve, you can give some of what you have to others who have no food or no home or no hope. This is what the birth of Jesus means and what those who call him, Lord are required to do. (Ortberg)

If our desire is to live out the Christmas message...we too must become a people concerned about justice.

One of the mistakes we make in thinking about Mary mother of Jesus is thinking of her as kind of a bashful, shy...gentle Mary, meek and mild. Mary's song is a reminder, a call if you will that we, the church are called to be a people and a community of justice and peace.

We must become aware of the issues of justice in our world.

We must ask “how are we using the power we have been given?”

We must ask “how are we using our wealth?”

We must seek justice for all people, near and far in God’s great big world.

Pray.