

December 17, 2017  
Third Sunday of Advent

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Magnifying”

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine



Pastoral Prayer

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### **Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11**

<sup>61</sup>The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; <sup>2</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; <sup>3</sup>to provide for those who mourn in Zion — to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. <sup>4</sup>They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. <sup>8</sup>For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. <sup>9</sup>Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed. <sup>10</sup>I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. <sup>11</sup>For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

### **Luke 1:39–56**

<sup>39</sup>In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." <sup>46</sup>And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup>for he has looked with favor on the lowliness 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>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 thoughts 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 helped his servant 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." <sup>56</sup>And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

*“Magnify”*  
*Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11, Luke 1:39–56*

As a child, I thought we exchanged gifts on Christmas because it was Jesus’s birthday. On birthdays, people get gifts, and since Jesus isn’t here, we give gifts to one another. This admittedly questionable logic held up until sometime in late adolescence, when I began to view Christmas gift-giving as a way we imitate God’s generosity. But lately, as I’ve considered what it means to *give more* not more in a material sense, but more in a personal sense – I’ve been reflecting on how Jesus models giving. Jesus constantly gave, of course, but what he gave was almost never *material* in nature. He gave of *himself*. Teaching. Healing. Listening. Challenging. Dying. So what would it look like for us to *give more* the way Jesus gave?

Today, we find an answer to that question in the words of Isaiah and Mary. These are words that challenge the status quo and announce God’s justice, justice that both condemns and overturns things our world says are powerful – wealth, status, political power. Both Mary and Isaiah use the power of speech to, as Mary says, ***magnify the Lord***. Mary and Isaiah teach us that ***we give more when we speak truth to power in the name of God’s justice***.

Nearly twenty years ago, when I was in seminary, I went to lunch with a pastor who is to this day a dear friend and trusted mentor. I have forgotten most of what we talked about, but I remember that for a few minutes, we discussed what it means to be a woman in ministry. He gave me some advice: “If you want to show people that women can be effective ministers,” he said, “then don’t try to be the best *female* minister you can be. Just be the best *minister* you can be.”

At the time, this seemed like good advice, and in some ways it is. All of us, no matter what our identity, should strive to do our best at whatever work we are called to do. But in the past year, as more and more women and some men have found the courage to break the silence about the treatment they have endured in all kinds of workplaces – treatment ranging from disrespect to horrific instances of assault, I have thought about that innocent comment from my friend, and I have wondered: in trying so hard to *not* call attention to the particular gifts and challenges of women in ministry, have I been complicit in the many ways the church has failed to speak truth to power and seek justice for those who have been oppressed and abused? Have I failed to follow Mary’s example of magnifying the Lord by boldly speaking the truth?

If you’re worried that this sermon is about to turn in to a #MeToo moment, don’t be. I didn’t come into this pulpit today to tell my stories of disrespect or abuse. Which isn’t to say I don’t have stories to tell, because in my experience, there isn’t a woman alive who doesn’t have a story to tell. If you are not a woman, I encourage you to go home and ask the women you love what their stories are.

I broach this topic today because when I read today's scripture after reading the headlines, I couldn't help but recognize in Mary the brave and outspoken women – and some men – who are making those headlines as they break silence to share their stories. I broach the topic of oppression and abuse today because even as I face my own complicity in how women are treated in our culture, I can't help but think about all the ways the church – this institution I love and to which I have devoted my career – I can't help but think of all the ways the church has also been complicit in the unjust treatment of women and men who have been abused by those in power. And by the church, I mean all of us.

One of the ways the church has been complicit is through our depiction of Mary. In countless works of art from hymnody to poetry to paintings, Mary has been depicted as meek and mild, even weak and submissive. But is that really the Mary we meet in the Bible? The gospel of Luke is the only gospel writer who gives Mary much of a part in this story, but the Mary of Luke's gospel is anything but weak. When the angel Gabriel comes to her to tell her that she will conceive a child, she doesn't just acquiesce silently. She responds with the question of a curious scientist: "how can this be, since I've done none of the things necessary for conception?" And when the angel explains how this will happen, *she gives her consent*. She claims and declares her own agency in this situation.

The very next thing that happens is that Mary goes off on a journey *by herself* to visit her cousin Elizabeth. **She goes on a journey by herself!** And like most pregnant women, she seeks out the company and the advice of a trusted female companion. In Mary's case, the woman she seeks out is a relative, one who has also found herself unexpectedly pregnant, and one whose pregnancy is also the source of all manner of unkind gossip, for Elizabeth is so old that she had long since given up the hope of having a baby. Together, these two women share their stories and know their experiences will be heard and believed and respected.

But Mary does not stop with simply whispering her story to Elizabeth. She *gives more* by boldly proclaiming God's power and justice with a song that begins, "my soul magnifies the Lord!" How did we ever get the idea that Mary is passive and submissive? Surely not from the Bible. In the Bible, we see Mary traveling, not just to see Elizabeth, but from Nazareth to Bethlehem to Egypt and back to Nazareth again. We hear Mary singing a song of God's revolutionary, world-shattering justice. We witness her giving birth in circumstances most of us would never dream of, and then welcoming strangers when her new baby is just hours old. We watch her follow her son throughout his ministry right up until his death on a cross. I can't help but wonder if we have painted Mary with soft colors and gentle strokes to avoid the way she challenges us to question the status quo, even in the church, to claim our own

power, to tell our own stories, to let our souls magnify the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

This past month in the *Christian Century*, a female pastor in the Presbyterian Church shared two stories. One was of being raped in her early 20's; the other was sexual harassment she experienced from her senior pastor and boss in her first associate pastor position. At the end of the article, she compares her experiences in the criminal courts of Michigan and in the ecclesiastical courts of the Presbyterian Church (USA). She writes that in the criminal court in 1980, she was able to testify against her abuser and be heard by a jury of peers. She could look her abuser in the face. She heard a gavel fall and a verdict ring with clarity and power. Guilty! The offender had to pay for his crime with a sentence of life in prison. Once the trial had passed, she received a letter from the state of Michigan thanking her for her willingness to testify, since the court was aware that she could have refused to do so, as it was emotionally painful. She also received a check to cover the loss of her stolen goods. The amount was relatively small, but what it signified was enormous: a just society recognizes when harm has been done and makes an effort to compensate victims.

By contrast, in the ecclesiastical court in 2011, the investigating committee ruled that there was cause to move forward *and paradoxically* asked her to drop the case. They reminded her that the case was costing precious resources from the denomination. She was asked to forgive her abuser even before he admitted guilt and even though he never apologized. Court correspondence focused on whether she had "healed" from the abuse, as if healing, not justice, was the court's main concern. After the verdict she was not invited to be present when her abuser was formally rebuked. She never received a letter thanking her for her willingness to prosecute and she never received any compensation. In fact, when she first met with the Personnel Committee at the church to share her story, their response was to ask, 'What can we do make this go away?'"<sup>2</sup>

For too long, the church has been complicit in supporting a culture indifferent to the cries of those who have been oppressed or abused, and whether that complicity was intentional or unintentional, whether it was done out of malice or fear, the time has come for us to follow the example of Mary and magnify our Lord by speaking truth to power. The God we magnify is a God of justice, justice that believes and heals, justice that does not bend to earthly powers but reveals the powers of God. This is the God Mary magnifies. This is the God we are called to magnify.

Now you may be wondering whether a church as progressive as this one really has work to do to speak out and fight for justice. After all, we have two female pastors, one a woman of color. For a Presbyterian Church, we are remarkably diverse

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/no-more-lying-about-mary/>

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Everhart, A Pastor's #MeToo Story, *The Christian Century*, Dec. 4, 2017.  
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/pastors-metoo-story>

in all kinds of ways. And over the years, this church has been on the front lines of a number of social justice issues. But what is happening right now in our culture should remind us: there is always more work to be done to bring our culture in line with God's justice and the church in every age has new opportunities to do so. We can never rest on what we have done in the past. There are always people in our midst being quietly but systematically oppressed, and it is these people that Mary calls us to notice and fight for.

Mary calls us, as individuals and as a church, to confront and proclaim the unpleasant truth:

- that women still feel unsafe in board rooms, bars, and city streets.
- that many of our children still assume that God is a man.
- that women are paid less than men for the same work.
- that many of us are more comfortable with a man in leadership than a woman.
- that we hold our young women to a higher moral standard than we do our young men.
- that we teach our girls that a certain level of harassment from boys is to be expected... "boys will be boys after all"...and that if they are harassed it might be their own fault.
- that we have elected to public office, including the highest public office in the land, men from *both* political parties credibly accused of sexual assault,
- that we too often have put our political allegiances ahead of what we know to be ethically and morally reprehensible.
- that we are more comfortable blaming and shaming the women who are brave enough to tell their stories rather than hold accountable the men who are their abusers.<sup>3</sup>

**Giving more means being willing to speak the truth when we would rather remain silent.** There is nothing easy about this kind of giving, for it requires each one of us to examine how we have been complicit in perpetuating injustice and how we have benefited from structures founded on injustice. But it is only when we are willing to name and repent of our collective sin that we will be able to restructure the systems in our culture and our churches, that enable abuse and oppression of all kinds.

After her encounter with the angel Gabriel and her unexpected pregnancy, Mary does not choose silence. She shares her story with a trusted relative and then has the courage to sing this song that has magnified God's name through the ages. This is the power of giving more of ourselves, of breaking silence to share our stories, of standing in solidarity with those who have been oppressed. This is the power Lindsey

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<sup>3</sup> This list was developed in collaboration with the Rev. Derek Starr Redwine, who preached on this topic with the sermon "Accountable" at Fairmount Presbyterian Church in Cleveland, Ohio on December 10, 2017.

Reynolds discovered when she broke her silence. After she quit her job as a social-media manager at the restaurant group of celebrity chef John Best, she sent an email to her bosses complaining about the company's culture of sexism. "After I sent that email," Lindsey said, "I burst into tears and felt sick to my stomach and was shaking. I was nobody. I'm just a person from a small town in Texas. I have no money, no power, no social standing. And they have more power and money than I will ever have. I felt extremely vulnerable and scared. Then I [started hearing] from women I had never met—[women who] worked as line cooks while I worked in corporate—[and I learned how they] had experienced the same toxic culture."<sup>4</sup>

The enduring gift of Christmas is the knowledge that we are not ever alone in our suffering. God provides for us companions and friends who will listen to us, believe us, stand up for justice on our behalf, and help us speak truth to power. And the good news of the gospel is that whenever we speak truth to power, whenever we claim our agency, whenever we risk our privilege and status to speak out against injustice, oppression, and abuse, we discover God already at work, transforming and overturning and making all things new. The power of Mary's words does not come from her strength, or her courage, or her honesty, the power of Mary's words comes from the God who is always eager to step into the space between the injustice we name and the future we long to see.

This Christmas may we *give more* of ourselves by speaking truth to power in the name of justice, not because we believe it will bring about the change we seek, but because we know that our God will step into the breach, into the confusion, into the uncertainty, into all the pain and injustice of this world. May we give more of ourselves because we know that God is coming, and when God comes, all things will be made new.

Amen.

### *Pastoral Prayer ~ Kevin J. Lowry*

God of all time and place, it is our greatest joy to offer you thanks, to offer you praise. You created light out of darkness and brought forth life on the earth. You formed us in your image, called us to love and serve you, and in our unfaithfulness, you have never turned away. Thank you for every work to free us from our sin, for every time you have pulled us back to your promises, for every person you have placed in our lives to speak truth to power and show us your way.

We thank you for your Word, for Christ, one with you since before the beginning of time. Thank you for your love so expansive that you would send your Son, Jesus Christ, to be our Savior. In him, your Word took on skin and bone like ours

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<sup>4</sup> <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/>



and lived among us, full of grace and truth. And we glorify you, Emmanuel, God with us!

Mother God we praise you, joining our voices with the choirs of angels who ever sing to the glory of your name. Thank you for teaching us humility in Jesus' fragile beginnings—who, helpless as an infant, showed the power of your love; who, poor in the things of the world, brought the wealth of your grace; who, rejected by many, welcomed all who sought him.

Even as we prepare for the birth of the Christ Child, we give thanks for his dying and rising, in which you gave birth to your church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit. With thanksgiving we offer ourselves to you to be a living and holy sacrifice, dedicated to your service. By your Spirit, make us one with Christ, and one with those who have gone before us and those who come after us, that we may be united at in your kingdom which transcends time and place.

God of mercy we lift up the prayers of this community. For all those who live, study, work, play, and seek care in our neighborhood that they may feel your presence with them and within them as they go about their daily living. We lift up all those in the Covenant Community who are seeking healing and comfort by your loving grace, especially Randy, Patrick and Marty; Don, Judy Andrew and Akeya; Norma, Rich, Anne, Marlene, and Prince; Eliseo, Greg, Elizabeth, Olitana, Daniel, and Robert; Tome, Liam, Doug, Jeff. We pray for all those in our community with are in the midst of pain and suffering, those who are homebound and those who are dealing with the disease of addiction. We pray for all the prayers that have been lifted up in this sanctuary throughout the week and especially those prayers left in our carpenters box; Joy, Valarie, Christi; Stephen David and Lynn; Vern, jay, Daniel, Aaron Pamela and Victoria.

As our student community ends their semester, we pray for each one of them as they travel, explore and discover over winter break. We pray for Marion and Jennifer as the discern how they use their gifts and talents in this world.

Empower us by your Spirit, O God, to be Christ's presence in the world even as Jesus was God-with-us. Give us courage to speak Christ's truth, to seek his justice, and to love with his love. Keep us faithful in your service, as we pray together as he has taught us: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.