

Any good sermon pays close attention to context. We have to know a little bit about the context in which our sacred stories were written if we are to understand them. And then we have to discern how the message for that original audience applies to us today, in our context. And normally I start with the context in which the story was written. But today, I want to do the opposite. I want us to hear these words of Mary in light of our own context.

We just finished another divisive election season. Some of us may be happy about the outcome. Some of us may be sad. But let me tell you about some people who must feel absolutely terrified and some people who must have felt so attacked.

\$215 million dollars were spent attacking trans people. Yes, these ads were meant to attack politicians but the attack was specifically that they support trans people. Imagine you are a trans teenager. Imagine you may have been bullied. You are already a part of the group that is most likely to die by suicide because you've been explicitly and implicitly made to feel that you don't belong. And let's say you live in a swing state and you see ad after ad after ad attacking you.

This is part of our context right now. And into this context, we read these words from Mary:

God has shown strength with the arm;
and scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
⁵² God has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ God has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.

Now, think about what this time must feel like for a Haitian refugee. Put yourself in their shoes. You've fled unspeakable violence, somehow survived an impossible journey. Maybe you have a small child with you. All you want is a safe place to try to establish some semblance of a life. And the message you hear right now is "mass deportations." You lived through a campaign where people like you were falsely accused of stealing and eating people's pets, furthering the image that you are not really human. You're terrified of what will happen to you and your kids. What if the government implements another family separation policy and your kids are taken away from you and you have no idea how to find them.

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I specifically picked these two examples not because they are the only two examples but because they hit close to home. We have trans kids who are part of our church's youth group. We have members who have trans children.

We've hosted dozens of Haitian refugee families in our building and the coats we are collecting will go to them.

I am not talking about abstract issues.

I am talking about real people, people we love, people who are part of our community, people who have sat on the couches of the youth room and had a meal in Johnson Hall.

The question for us, today, is what word does God have to say to us in this context through the words that Mary sang 2000 years ago? And to maybe start to find an answer to that question, let's go back, now, to Mary's context.

Mary lived at a time when the Roman Empire occupied Palestine. They exacted taxes and tribute. They took the natural resources of the people to feed the luxury of Roman cities. They exploited peasants like Mary and her family to no end. She also lived under a religious system that set up classifications of good and bad, clean and unclean. As an unwed pregnant woman, Mary would have been considered unclean, sinful, worthless. And finally, Mary was a woman in a patriarchal society where she was considered to be little more than property who first belonged to her father and then to her husband. Mary and other women like her were exploited by the empire, denied agency over their own life and body because of their gender, and rejected as unclean by the religious establishment.

Mary had a lot in common with the trans teenager who is so hurt by being used as a political punching bag. She had a lot in common with the Haitian refugee who is terrified about what may happen now. In fact, soon after Jesus was born, she along with Joseph and Jesus, would become refugees themselves fleeing the genocide King Herod tried to unleash.

Mary had a lot in common with every single person who feels like the world as it is does not work for them.

And into this context, into her own context, she sang:

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Notice the tense Mary uses. She is so confident that the powers of oppression will not last forever, that she sings about it in the past tense, as if they had already fallen. Now, it may be easy

to dismiss that as naïve...unless we look at history. Mary knew the history of her people. She knew that the Jewish people in Egypt were set free. She knew that the exiles in Babylon came home. She knew that the Roman empire would not last forever. She knew that religious bullying would not last forever. She knew that the very foundations of oppression were already cracking; they were already defeated. As Katy reminded us last week, Mary understood how God works throughout generations and trusted that God was still at work. She knew the stories of her people, stories that reminded her that hope will always find away.

And because Mary dared to believe the stories of her people, because she dared to proclaim a defiant hope even against all odds, she became a part of our story, a story that reminds us who we are and who God is. A story that challenges us to relentlessly cling to hope no matter what. It's the same story we tell every year during Advent.

It's the story of how God did not choose a prominent or powerful person to bring Jesus into the world, but one who was lowly, who was deemed insignificant – Mary – to be the mother of Jesus. It's this story where it wasn't the religious elite who came bringing gifts, but foreigners, people who practiced a different religion who came offer their best to Jesus. It's this story where angels appeared not to princes and kings but to shepherds out in the fields all night, working hard to scrap by, to be the first ones to come and worship Jesus. Every single person in the Christmas story fits the definition of lowly in some form or fashion. And this is the story that we dare to believe has brought hope to the whole world.

This is our story. And no one articulates what this story means more powerfully than Mary.

But Mary didn't just proclaim this hope. She literally birthed it into the world.

And maybe that's the invitation this story has for us. How are we birthing hope into the world? I have a few ideas of what that looks like for us in our context.

Every time, you share a kind word to a kid – or adult for that matter – who feels like they don't belong, you are birthing hope into the world.

Every time you say to someone who has been told that something is wrong with them, "No, you're perfect just as you are," you're birthing hope into the world.

Every time you bring a coat so that someone who has recently arrived here will be a little bit warmer this Winter, you are birthing hope in the world.

You see, friends, we birth hope into the world in the countless small, kind acts of love and service that we can perform every single day. When we do that, we are being like Mary, even if it's just a little bit.

But we also have to remember just how much Mary was willing to do. Normally in the Bible when God asks somebody to do something, God has to drag them kicking and screaming.

Several weeks ago I told you about Elijah who begged for God to kill him rather than for him to keep living out God's call. Moses argued with God for like 3 chapters before finally going back to Egypt. Isaiah cried out, "Woe is me," when God called him. Everybody resisted...everybody but Mary. When the angel told her she would have a baby, she simply said, "I am the Lord's servant."

And I know we think of this story as the sweet idyllic story of a new baby and a manger and wise men. But think about what it meant for Mary. Joseph wanted to leave her. In her culture as an unwed pregnant woman, she would have been rejected, cast out, shunned. All God was asking Mary to do was to risk everything.

And she said yes.

Mary may have been the most courageous person in the whole Bible.

I'm telling you this because I wonder if God might not be calling us to do something that requires a little more, that requires us to risk. Two weeks ago, Erika told us about a group that has convened made up of people from different congregations here in Milton to see what we might be able to do to provide shelter for our Haitian friends. And here's what they've come up with:

We can give money to a fund to pay for hotel rooms...AND...we can open up our own homes for a few days, for a week. Soon I'll share with you information about what all that entails and what support structures might help us say yes to something that sounds so big, so hard. But for now, my ask of you is to pray about it...not in a dismissive way...in a real way.

God, what are you asking me to do right now?

I'm asking you to spend some time with Mary's words over the next few weeks and think about what it took for her to say yes.

And ya'll, I know we're not all in the same place. I know for some of you, saying yes to something like this is impossible right now. For some of us, we might just not be in a place where we are emotionally, physically, or mentally able to do that. That's ok. There really is a role for everyone. You can provide a meal, help with transportation, share bedding...whatever it may be.

No is a faithful answer to this ask. But what I think is not a faithful answer is to dismiss it without considering what it is each of us can do to birth hope into the world, lift up the lowly whether is a refugee or a scared bullied kid or a lonely neighbor or whoever else feels like the world is crushing them right now.

Mary's song invites us and challenges us to not just tell the Christmas story but to live it...just like she did. Amen.