



**Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church**  
**Asheville, North Carolina**  
**23 December 2018**  
**Sermon: “Something is Stirring”**  
**Fourth Sunday in Advent**  
**Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block**

**Micah 5:2-5a**  
**Luke 1:39-47**

Juan Diego saw a vision high on the hill of *Tepayac* – just outside of Mexico City. The vision was of a young woman. She spoke to him in his native tongue *Nahwahtul*, the language of the Aztec empire. She told him to go to the archbishop and ask that a church be built for her on that very same hill. And she revealed herself to be “the mother of the true deity.” Juan Diego could hardly catch his breath. Standing before him was a vision of the Virgin Mary herself.

Now, Juan was a poor indigenous man living in 1531. His fellow native people were surviving under horrific conditions, powerless and ostracized by their Spanish conquerors. So, when he did as the vision commanded and approached the bishop with his story, he was immediately dismissed.

Again and again, he tried to share the Virgin Mary’s request with the bishop, but again and again, he was turned away from the door, snickered at, and scolded. Finally, the bishop said, “If you can go back to that hill and have the Virgin give you a miraculous, tangible sign that it *is* really her – then I will believe you.”

So, Juan Diego prayed to the Virgin Mary to meet him on that hill the very next day. But on his way there, he learned that his uncle had taken ill. So, he turned back to attend to him. Finally, when he returned to the road, the Virgin appeared again. She extended her hand toward him and then wagged her finger scolding him for his tardiness.

“I was attending to my sick uncle,” he said in his defense. The Virgin replied sternly,

“Why did you not come to me? *No estoy yo aquí que soy tu madre?* - Am I not here, I who am your mother?”

She then softened her voice, assuring him to trust that his uncle would be made well again. She then said that he should go to the hill to pick flowers. Juan Diego laughed. It was December in Mexico. It was cold on that hill. Surely every plant and flower would be dead.

But when Juan got to the top, there were bright Spanish roses – yellows, pinks, reds – all colors in bloom (flowers that had never grown there before). The Virgin took the flowers he had picked and arranged them in the inside of Juan’s cloak and then told him to return to the bishop.

When he stood before this powerful man once again, he opened his cloak and all of the flowers fell to the ground. Hidden behind them, embedded in the fabric, was a glorious image of the Virgin Mary herself: *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. There, for all the world to see.

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Mary, the mother of Jesus, has never been one to hide in the shadows, but rather (despite everything) has always boldly revealed herself to others - even from the very first chapter in Luke. When we meet her, she is facing a divine and dangerous task. The angel Gabriel has declared that the Lord has chosen her to carry God's only son.

This awesome news puts Mary's life at risk in every way: from her upcoming marriage, to her family's reputation, to her personal safety. To be a woman in ancient Israel is hard enough. To be a single mother, who could be accused of adultery is synonymous with a life of destitution, marginalization, even death. We would understand if Mary hurried to the hills to hide from her community or to the feet of her betrothed, begging Joseph for mercy and silence.

But instead of shutting herself away, she feels compelled to reveal herself: hurrying to connect with her dear relative, readying her voice to sing a song of joy and praise to God: "*My soul magnifies the Lord.*"

Her reaction to the news of this holy child is surprising. Think of our own lives. These days - with each new jaw-dropping headline and each new struggle we face - hope can feel further and further out of reach. In times like these, we tend to want to close up, cut ourselves off, shut down. It's easier this way. We don't have to face each other, or open up about our feelings of guilt, fear or shame. We convince ourselves that it is impossible for anyone to understand the depths of our pain. We convince ourselves that it is impossible for anyone to know how to ease our suffering.

And let's face it, we've been socialized this way. Our society teaches us that independence is a sure sign of success: every person for themselves, the strongest survive, the ambitious go far, the toughest win. To really need one another to thrive, to lean on community with our full selves, to cry out for help 'til our throats are sore are all considered to be signs of weakness, not boldness - defeat not courage.

And yet today we find ourselves standing before *this* text that defies everything we have ever been taught. Mary's very existence is hanging in the balance, but instead of confining herself to the safety of her room for nine months, she flees from it immediately, bursts through the door and out into the open, into the city of Judea. She runs toward her cousin Elizabeth, standing before her in all her truth and vulnerability.

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*What brings Mary to Elizabeth's door?*

We don't know very much about Mary and Elizabeth's relationship, but we can imagine together that Mary looked up to her older cousin as one who could offer sound advice, one she could turn to in difficult times.

Maybe Elizabeth was the first person Mary approached when she had doubts about God or fears about marriage. Since Elizabeth had had no children of her own, maybe Mary had always filled that space for her. She had taught her younger cousin how to do her hair, sing from her diaphragm, prepare a Passover meal. As Mary grew perhaps Elizabeth looked to her as more of a friend – sharing private stories about the first time she laid eyes on Zechariah in the temple, or the deep sadness she felt after her tenth miscarriage.

Mary and Elizabeth were distant in age, but their lives had always been intertwined. They shared a deep love for the other – a love God recognized and blessed.

What if Mary was never meant to carry this baby Jesus alone? God knew that she needed a partner in this: a mother and son who could help *prepare the way* for her and the child she would bear – the Savior of the world.

And so, six months earlier before the angel visits Mary, God miraculously blesses Elizabeth with the impossible: a pregnancy (even though she is long past child bearing years). God chooses these two unlikely women to carry *grace* into the world together.

As Mary stands in Elizabeth's doorway, their differences in age seem to melt away, they look into each other's eyes and share their collective fears, their joys, their wonder, their faith in the impossible, and their promise that they will not walk this path alone.

Who is your Elizabeth - the one you run to when you are feeling especially vulnerable?  
Who is your Mary - the one who turns to you in times of great need?  
Who is the one whose faith strengthens your own, or whose faith is strengthened by yours?

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What I find fascinating about this morning's text is that so often we skim over Elizabeth and Mary's encounter. We hurry straight to the *Magnificat* (the good stuff!): Mary's powerful song that speaks of God's ability to humble the proud, to fill the hungry, to lift up the lowly, to find hope in the midst of hopelessness.

But we have to wonder...*what is it that inspires Mary to lift up her voice?*

When Mary greets Elizabeth at her door, the child within her cousin leaps for joy and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. She exclaims, "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*"

Before Mary utters a word to God, it is Elizabeth who listens for the Spirit and readies Mary's voice. Their shared trust in each other, invites Elizabeth to speak with the power of a prophet. And her words empower Mary to celebrate the Christ child she is being called to bring into this world with greater confidence. "*My soul magnifies the Lord,*" Mary belts out.

Indeed, Mary's song does not emerge from a lonely place, but springs forth from a relationship of mutuality, from the sort of community God calls us to create: where power is shared, and where we recognize God working among us and through us.

Yes, in this moment, in this ordinary doorway, Mary affirms Elizabeth's prophetic witness and Elizabeth affirms Mary's divine calling. Within both women, God's joy and hope are already stirring. And in their wombs, something new and transformative is waiting to be born.

A Savior and a Baptizer are coming! Mary and Elizabeth – together – this most unlikely pair, are the ones God has chosen to carry light and peace into this world so thirsty for healing.

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Last month, our country was brought to its knees when eleven individuals were murdered in a synagogue in Pittsburg. While they prayed, and welcomed an eight-day-old baby boy into the community, the gunman burst into the building.

The issue of gun violence is certainly nothing new for us as a nation. It is like a plague that continues to infest every aspect of American life (a night club in Miami, a church in Charleston, a movie theater in Aurora, a high school in Parkland, a bank on Merrimon Avenue – just this past week). Gun violence has claimed more than 14,000 lives over the course of 2018 and injured more than 27,000. Our young people know all too well what it is like to barricade their classroom door and sit in the dark during a school lock down.

I remember the day that I heard the news about the shooting at the Tree of Life Congregation. I was sitting in my living room alone - feeling numb with disbelief. Then I received a text message saying that a small gathering was to be held at Beth HaTephila synagogue that same evening. I put on my coat and hurried out the door.

When I got to the temple, there were a few dozen folks sitting together in the sanctuary. The rabbi remarked, "I don't have anything planned, I just thought we should be together."

As the evening went, on we began to talk about holding a community wide vigil the following day downtown. The rabbi asked "Sam, would you be willing to speak at it?"

Every part of me wanted to say, no. I wasn't ready to talk. I didn't have the words. I hadn't processed my own feelings yet. How could I possibly share my heart with a crowd? But my friend had asked me to speak as a person of faith, and so I trusted the request and said, "yes."

When I got to the vigil the next day, there were hundreds of people there. There was a lump in my throat, but I remember looking out and seeing nearly fifty Grace Covenant members in the crowd. Seeing you there gave me the strength to speak. And when I finished, I came up to you all and fell into your arms weeping.

I don't remember a time when I have felt that vulnerable and exposed, but then again, I don't remember a time when I have felt more supported and hopeful. You lifted my spirits and my voice that day – as only a community of mutual understanding and deep faith can do. And together we sang songs of peace: "*Lord prepare me to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true, with thanksgiving I'll be a living, sanctuary for you.*"

As we sang, I could feel that stirring in my soul that God was – and is – indeed with us: hope ready to be born once more.

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*My soul magnifies the Lord,”* Mary sings out.

Through her story and song, we bear witness to a God who bursts through our pain, who calls upon the most unlikely of messengers, who readies us to sing in harmony, who empowers us to trust in one other and in God, in what seems most impossible.

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Juan Diego was another unexpected messenger of God. The bishop had dismissed him over and over again. But now finally holding up his cloak, the all-power bishop’s eyes met Juan’s for the first time. He sees him, not as a lowly peasant, but as fellow person of faith with sacred truth to share.

Their collective faith in *La Virgen de Guadeloupe* (the Virgin Mary that Juan had seen) helped to unify Spanish Catholicism and indigenous Aztec traditions, creating a new mestizo identity.

Centuries later, that same image of the Virgin was one protesters carried when they marched for farmworkers rights through California.

And still today, her story inspires communities to sing together “*De Colores*” – a song to remember the flowers that fell from Juan’s cloak to reveal Mary in “all of her glory.”

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On this last Sunday in Advent, we can hardly wait any longer to see Christ’s face revealed. The world is aching and we are weary. But Mary and Elizabeth remind us that we need not wait alone.

As Christians, we are called to run towards each other:  
to be vulnerable and prophetic,  
to inspire our siblings to build the sort of mutual community  
where we really see and affirm each soul,  
ready each other’s song,  
hold each other up,  
help each other cling tight to the hope and joy that God *is* coming (bursting into the world) -  
even when it feels impossible...

even in the midst of hopelessness...  
even after weeks of Advent waiting...

God *is* coming!  
We need only cling tight to our siblings in faith,  
and together sing louder than ever before.