

Tracy Daub
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Luke 1:46-55

IN REMEMBRANCE OF GOD'S MERCY

Here it is the fourth Sunday in Advent and we are still listening to Mary sing her song. And that is because Mary has much to say that helps us understand and prepare for the coming of Christ. We hear Mary rejoice in her song about the things God will accomplish through the birth of the child she anticipates. And one of those things God is accomplishing in the coming of Christ is mercy. Mary sings that God "has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." Mercy defines the coming of Christ.

Now, mercy is sometimes not easily found these days. The stories that dominate our news cycles and our daily experiences are usually lacking in much mercy. The animosity that has come to define our political reality means that little mercy is extended across the political aisle. Restaurants deny service to politicians whose policies they don't like and bakeries turn away customers whose lives they don't support. Immigrant peoples making life-threatening journeys across seas and deserts in desperation for themselves and their families are greeted with rejection and hostility by other nations. When people are characterized as either "winners" or "losers" as defined by some of our leaders, then there is clearly little regard for mercy.

Can you recall the last time you had mercy extended to you? Maybe you knew a boss who tolerated no mistakes and offered no second chances. Maybe there is a family member who will never forgive or forget. I wonder if we can recall what it feels like to extend mercy toward others, instead of turning to judgment, anger, rejection, or jealousy? Mercy is not always easy to extend.

But even if we can't, God does. That's the promise. And that is what Mary sings about. God "has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise God made to Abraham" and to all of Abraham's descendants forever, even right up to you and me here today. What you and I need this season of Advent is the remembrance of God's mercy.

What is mercy exactly? Like a recipe, mercy is comprised of many ingredients: some love, a dash of compassion, a measure of kindness, a portion of forgiveness. Mercy is kind or forgiving treatment of someone who could be treated harshly. It is also kindness or help given to people facing a very bad or desperate situation.

What we are recalling here today on this fourth Sunday in Advent as we have nearly arrived at the birth of the Christ child, what we recall here is the gift we most need from God: the gift of mercy. We are those people who are in need of kind and forgiving treatment when we could and often deserve to be treated harshly. We are those people who are in need of kindness and help in the face of our own desperate situations. And with the arrival of Christ, God offers us mercy.

This is not a mercy that gives us permission to live any old way we want. It is not a mercy without judgment for our bad behavior. But it is a mercy that is offered in love that it might transform us, change us, shape us, and draw us into becoming something different. It is a mercy that recognizes human suffering and brokenness, and responds with compassion and love and justice.

Mary probably didn't receive much mercy in her life. She refers to herself in this song as a lowly servant. In her world she was indeed lowly. She was female. And she was poor. And then, she became an unwed pregnant woman. And that meant she should have been rejected, distrusted, and doubted. No mercy for such a woman as her.

But Mary becomes the one who testifies to God's mercy and love. Mary proclaims what God's mercy has meant for her--that she was lifted up. God's mercy meant that she and people in her position of poverty and vulnerability had received special attention by the God of justice and compassion.

And just as Mary proclaimed, mercy does define the life and teachings of Jesus as he grows up. In the gospel stories, we read about Jesus offering forgiveness rather than judgment. We see him direct his compassion toward the lowly, the rejected, the despised. When people are hungry or sick, he feeds them and heals them. Instead of turning away the despised politician, Jesus sits down at the table and eats with the tax collector. Instead of turning away people in need because it was the Sabbath day and the rules dictated that no work could be done, Jesus offers mercy and heals the sick on the Sabbath. When the Gentile woman or the Gentile leader appeal to Jesus to heal their children, Jesus does not tell them that he disapproves of their lifestyle or their values; he heals their children. He touches the untouchable and the diseased. And when his closest friends utterly fail him, the risen Jesus does not greet them with words of judgment but with love and mercy. And thus, he raises them and us to new life as well, giving us second, third, and endless chances to follow God on the path of love.

Mercy defines Jesus' reign. At Christmas, we recall the mercy we receive daily, hourly from our God. We recall not only that we are recipients of God's mercy, but that we are blessed to become participants in God's mercy.

What if our starting point each morning as we got out of bed was mercy? What if our starting point was mercy instead of judgment, instead of anger, instead of rejection, instead of hatred, instead of fault-finding? What if our starting point was mercy toward those who could be treated harshly by us, or mercy toward those in bad or desperate situations?

I invite us to remember God's gift of mercy this season as we prepare for the coming of Christ into our lives and hearts. I am going to invite us to sit in silent prayer, to first give thanks for some way we have received God's mercy in our lives--a mercy that either forgave us or helped us when we were lowly or in need. And then I invite us to pray for some person or situation in our lives to whom we might extend God's mercy.

Let us pray:

O God we first give you thanks for the mercy you have extended to each of us, by forgiving us or helping us in a time of need. Hear our prayers of gratitude. (silence)

Loving God, we now pray for a specific person or situation we know about where you invite us to offer mercy to someone who we might otherwise treat harshly, or to someone who is facing a bad or desperate situation. (silence)

These prayers we offer to you, O Merciful One, whose gift of Christ is the great gift of mercy that heals us and transforms us. Amen.