

Good snowy morning! I'll be brief this morning with this announcement:

**We will begin our worship service this morning at 10:30 a.m. rather than 9:30 a.m.** to allow time for the roads to clear up a bit at the end of this lovely snowstorm. It's a light and fluffy snow, but still.... be careful on the roads.... And stay home if you would feel safer doing that. I'll post my sermon later this afternoon on the church's Facebook page – the Federated Church of Thomaston and on my personal Facebook page – freerangepastor....

Blessings to each one on this fourth Sunday in Advent. The theme is “love.”

**“My soul magnifies the Lord”  
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston  
Thomaston, Maine  
Sunday, December 19, 2021  
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet  
Scripture: Luke 1:39-45 & 1:46-55**

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in [Elizabeth's] womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” Luke 1:39-45

And Mary said,  
“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts  
of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.  
He 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.”  
Luke 1:46-55

Will you pray with me. Holy and life giving God, we are coming into countdown time, waiting for the Eve that brings many to church on a silent night filled with candlelight. This year, one more time, it will be in the church parking

lot we will gather with flashlights as our candlelight. But that night is still five days away. This day we hear of Mary's song of joy and prophetic wisdom as she learns she is about to have a baby. Help us to be joyful and rich with love in the midst of hard times and challenging situations. Help us to experience Mary's joy and to affirm her prophetic witness this day. Amen.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women. And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus." So begins the Rosary, the prayer known by heart by Catholics around the world. For those of us who are Protestant Christians, we usually only hear these words on the fourth Sunday of Advent. That's today and our Advent theme is love.

Old Elizabeth, who is about to give birth to John the Baptist, proclaims the statement of faith that will become the watchwords of millions of Christians around the world. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women. And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

Us Protestant Christians would do well to ponder these words in our hearts and minds, not only today, the fourth Sunday of Advent, but often.... As a Catholic friend of mine said to me years ago, "Don't worry" If Jesus won't let you in the front door, Mary will let you in the back door!"

Mary's song has become known as the Magnificat, stemming from her words, "My soul magnifies the Lord...."

Here's the question for the day: Does your soul magnify the Lord? Mary's did. Or rather the Gospel writer Luke tells us Mary's soul was joyful and full of anticipation after the angel Gabriel came and told her she was to have a baby – a very special baby – one who would cause millions upon millions of people to get down on their knees and pray to him for centuries upon centuries.

The Scriptures tell us she was a young girl, still a teenager, unwed, but betrothed to Joseph, an older man. She was not of wealthy origin, nor rich in any material way. But for some reason, which we're not meant to know, God chose her to be the birth mother to the divine man who would become the father of Christianity. Wow! Do you think your soul would have magnified the Lord had you been in Mary's shoes?

I don't think mine would have. I think I would have said something I can't really say vividly from the pulpit, like "Oh.... shoot.... Tell me again what it is you want from me? You want me to do what? You want me to birth who? Don't be silly! I'm just a young girl. I hardly know anything about life. Go get somebody else to birth this baby."

Mary's situation always reminds me of the scene from "Gone With the Wind," when Butterfly McQueen says, "I don't know nuthin' 'bout birthin' babies, [Miss Scarlett]." But in the Magnificat, God blesses Mary, and burdens her, too, with the birth that will change the world forever.

Here's the question for the day: Does your soul magnify the Lord? Mary's did, in spite of the greatest of odds, the most difficult of circumstances, the most unlikely nature of her ability to carry off this holy task. It's a weight, I tell you. And I don't think I could have born it, pun intended.

But we don't know what we can do until we're asked, do we? We don't know what burdens we can carry until they're on our backs. We don't know the challenges we can face, or the difficulties we can live through, until we do. And then we know. And then we can say, "My soul magnifies the Lord," or perhaps more in the vernacular of our day, "Thanks be to God," or maybe "Thank God, I got through that!" Maybe we say that....

But some say in the midst of a tragic situation, "Why did God make this horrible thing happen? Why did God let my baby die? Why did God give me this life changing illness?" "Why am I being asked to bear this burden?"

It's always a challenge to me, as a pastor, to hear people blame God for bad or difficult things that happen to them. I truly don't believe God makes or allows terrible or difficult things to happen. I believe God is present with us in the midst of their happening. But we only recognize that, if we believe it is so.... if we experience it through the words and actions of those around us.

The words and actions of Mary, the very young and inexperienced and poor mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, the very old mother of John serve as outstanding examples of the truth of verse thirty-seven of the first chapter of Luke, "For with God nothing will be impossible." (Lk 1:37)

Theologian and amazing preacher, Fred Craddock, writes of the angel Gabriel's words to both Elizabeth and Mary, "As a final word of assurance, the angel recalls the creed behind all creeds, the very words spoken to Abraham and Sarah when they doubted the word that they were to have a child, 'For with God nothing will be impossible.' (Gen 18:14) Mary [and Elizabeth] bow in humble obedience to the word of God."<sup>11</sup>

You know what? There's still dynamite within the Magnificat, it just too often gets watered down, diffused or misinterpreted. Read by Christians in communities around the world where poverty and oppression and injustice

characterize their every day, the words of the Magnificat hold a different meaning with an explosive level of passion than they do for most of us.

We may not feel we carry the burden and responsibility that Mary did in carrying Jesus in her womb, but we certainly carry the burden and responsibility of living out the life Jesus came to demonstrate to us all. The words of the Magnificat, coming from Mary's mouth after the annunciation, that's the announcement to Mary by the angel Gabriel that she was going to have a very special son, are as timely for us today as they were two thousand years ago.

Sometimes we get stuck in our own personal perspective about world issues, about religion, about politics, about life, and we forget that others may view things differently than we do. On this fourth Sunday in Advent, when we are called to ponder the power of love, we are also called to lay down or put aside our differences, and think of "the other" – those who are different from us, and how they might view the world, religion, politics, life.

This is the day on which we are called to think about and celebrate the coming of "the Prince of Peace" into the world through the belly of Mary and the praise and blessing of Elizabeth for Mary.

There is no need to debate whether Jesus' coming into the world was a virgin birth or not. All birth is a miracle. Every child born is a child of God.

There is no need to debate whether Jesus and his mother and Elizabeth were light skinned like us, or dark skinned, like our Muslim brothers and sisters. People of all skin colors are born of God.

There is no need to debate whether Catholics have the story right, or us Protestants, or even those who hold to no religious faith. None of us know the mind of God, but all of us are worthy of the heart of God's love for us.

We are called, I believe, as people of faith – Protestant or Catholic, Christian or otherwise, to carry the burden and responsibility of living out the life Jesus came to demonstrate for all of us. In this time of covid madness, political firestorms, and social distress and unrest, can we proclaim, "Let our souls magnify the Lord. Let our words and actions be worthy of Elizabeth and Mary's faith."

Let the people say, "Amen."

**Federated Church in Thomaston**  
**United Church of Christ    United Methodist Church**

**All Are Welcome**  
**Sunday, December 19, 2021 – fourth Sunday in Advent**

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet, Pastor Alice Billheimer, Organist/ Choir Director  
Lector: Richard Kortright

*Please be respectfully silent once our worship service has begun.  
An asterisk (\*) indicates where you are invited to stand.  
**Bold print** indicates that the people speak these responses & prayers.*

**GATHERING FOR WORSHIP**

**Welcome and Announcements a THANK YOU to our three Boy Scouts!**

**Prelude** He Shall Feed His Flock -- from "The Messiah" by G. F. Handel

**Call to Worship**

Pastor: We wait, not because we do not know the story of Jesus' birth, and not because God is not already and always here.

**People: We wait because to wait is to expect something more. To wait is to expect that the story might enter our hearts and our world in new ways, to bring the change for which we long.**

**All: We wait while we remember the stories of God's faithfulness and steadfast love which surrounds us and will not be contained. Let us worship God!**

**\*Opening Hymn** "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks" 73 Red Hymnal

**Lighting of the fourth candle in Advent for love....**

**A Responsive Reading** "A Prayer of the People for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent" (see insert)

**A Moment of Silence**

**SERVICE OF THE WORD**

**Scripture Reading** Luke 1:47-55

**\*Gloria Patri No. 70 Glory Be to the Father....**

**Message** "My soul magnifies the Lord" Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

**\*Hymn of Meditation** "What Child Is This" 219 Blue Hymnal

## RESPONDING IN FAITH

### Sharing Our Joys and Concerns with God and Each Other

#### Pastoral Prayer & The Lord's Prayer.....

**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.**

**Offertory** The Carolers -- suite based on familiar carols

**\*Doxology No. 95 Blue Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow....**

**\*Prayer of Dedication**

**\*Closing Hymn** "Angels From the Realms of Glory" 220 Blue Hymnal

#### **Benediction**

**Postlude** March of the Three Kings -- George Bizet, using an old French melody.

**Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, December 26, 2021**

**First Sunday after Christmas**

**1 Samuel 2:18-20,26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52**

**But we will focus on Luke 2:1-20, the Gospel text for Christmas Day!**

*"Love all that has been created by God, both the whole and every grain of sand. Love every leaf and every ray of light. Love the beasts and the birds, love the plants, love every separate fragment. If you love each separate fragment, you will understand the mystery of the whole resting in God."*

 Fyodor Dostoevsky

**Prayer List --** Hold in your prayers all those affected by the corona virus and the families of those who have died from the virus.... And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members.... And all those dealing with the ravages of cancer near and far..... And add a prayer for Frances Hernandez, recovering from brain surgery, Tammy Whirty, a friend of Margie's, dealing with cancer challenges, and, from Jackie a request for prayers for Kyle Cloudier, continued prayers for Ursula recovering...and for "Cody," who doesn't live locally but needs prayers for guidance; Kristin Parker O'Neal, Jo Ann Parker's daughter, who has had brain surgery and is home now!; Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams' family, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, BJ Thomson & family of Mimi's Uncle Doug, Heather Van Buskirk, and continued deep prayers for Lucy as Hank has come to the end of his

cancer journey, and for Tiffany, Lucy's granddaughter, and for Sally Harjula's family, since her death last month.....

*Please feel free to contact Susan by phone (207)322-1948 or by email [freerangepastor@gmail.com](mailto:freerangepastor@gmail.com) to add or drop the names from the prayer list AND to let her know if you would like for her to stop by for a visit sometime. She's always glad to have a chat with you!*

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Monday-12/20/21.....6:30 pm: Troop Meeting – Court of Honor  
Friday-12/24/21.....4:00 pm: Christmas Hymn Sing in the Church Parking Lot  
Saturday-12/25/21.....MERRY CHRISTMAS  
Sunday-12/26/21.....9:30 am: Worship Service  
Suggested Food Pantry Donation.....Rice

The Christmas arrangement is in loving memory of Gretchen Alex by the Alex family.

Reminders for next Sunday, 12/26/21

Greeter/Usher: Kay

Sylvester

Coffee

Host:

Lector: C

oretta

Cooper

Flowers:

Jackie Harjula

Collection Total for Sunday, December 12, 2021:

Pledges - \$270.00  
Loose - \$229.00, of which \$150.00 designated to TGS/ Angel tree  
Total - \$499.00

The 2021 weekly budgeted operating cost for the Church and parsonage is \$1623.00 per week.

**Federated Church of Thomaston  
United Church of Christ  
&  
United Methodist Church  
Together Since 1929**

*Sunday, December 19, 2021*

**8 Hyler Street, Thomaston, Maine 04861 (207) 354-6105**  
To contact the pastor via e-mail: [freerangepastor@gmail.com](mailto:freerangepastor@gmail.com)  
WiFi password is #1Church

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<sup>[1]</sup>Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990, p. 28.