



LESSONS IN LIVING

“Mary’s Song”

A St. Andrew’s Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
December 14, 2025

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:46-55 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Mary said: “My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior. For you have looked with favor upon your lowly servant, and from this day forward all generations will call me blessed. For you, the Almighty, have done great things for me, and holy is your name. Your mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear you. You have shown strength with your arm; you have scattered the proud in their conceit; you have deposed the mighty from their thrones and raised the lowly to high places. You have filled the hungry with good things, while you have sent the rich away empty. You have come to the aid of Israel your servant, mindful of your mercy—the promise you made to our ancestors—to Sarah and Abraham and their descendants forever.”

Sermon

Good morning. Thank you all for being here. I particularly appreciate the people sitting in the middle right there. When I was recuperating from surgery and watching online, I noticed the camera falls right in that empty spot, so it's good to see people sitting there [laughter]. We good Presbyterians cling to the walls and the backdrops.

I think one of the greatest gifts of living at this time in history is getting to know the Steel Magnolias of Texas. There weren't many pro-choice or pro-LGBTQ ministers when I first started realizing how important those stands were. So, I ended up in meetings with Ann Richards, Molly Ivins and Sarah Weddington...people I had no business being in the room with...but it was wonderful.

When I hear Mary's song, I always hear it in the voice of a Steel Magnolia: somebody who's naturally gentle but unyielding. The women I mentioned a few minutes ago were very polite and genteel unless you crossed them. Then you were about to get really sorry.

It's very understandable when people don't want to hear about politics in the church. I get it. I was the same way when I came out of seminary. But I don't know what love means anymore if it doesn't stand up for other people. I used to be incredibly popular, but I didn't get along with

anybody, because I wasn't standing up for anybody. As Christians, we're called to stand up for the cultures of the scapegoats.

Standing up for people who are long dead doesn't cut it. Taking a stand against slavery is great, but we have our own issues today...our own disguises for enslavement. That's why every year I focus on the Christmas hymns, because that's when the mysticism and the social justice of Christmas seamlessly merge.

The song Mary sings is about social justice. If you don't like that and you want a Christianity that doesn't rock any boats, then that's not this Christianity. Jesus didn't make it out alive because that wasn't his Christianity.

The Church today stands on the wrong side of the cross. Jesus was on the side with the nails; we're on the side of law and order. That's not the same religion. It's good to be a good citizen and to obey the laws, but there's a deeper tie that binds us to people all over the world, including Venezuelans in boats...people we don't know, who never had a trial, and who were simply murdered by what some people call America.

The Christmas story, if you really look at it, is haunted by Herod. None of the people we put in our nativity scenes could immigrate to the United States now. We cast the people we celebrate, of course, in porcelain so they look white.

We're almost all oppressed people. Christmas is a cry of hope for the scapegoats of the world, and a desperate, loving warning to those of us working inside other people's systems of oppression to leave those burning towers while we can. It's not easy, we all have decisions to make, and the lines aren't always clear. But hearing, at Christmas, the call to peace on earth and goodwill to all—that's the essence of what I consider Christianity to be.

I don't know when the Church traded the teachings of Jesus for the Apostles' Creed, but it wasn't a good day for humankind. Suddenly, very ignorant and cruel people could take up the name of Christ while essentially serving Herod and Caesar.

Christmas is a time of cold, dark, sometimes isolation. The star of the story isn't Jesus—he doesn't get any lines. He's the focal point, but it's Mary who speaks for humankind. And if we're going to hear the message of Christmas, hers is the voice we must listen to first.

From time to time, people leave this church because they don't want to hear about politics. I understand that. There are a thousand churches in Austin where you can be comfortable and never have to stand up for anybody. They are very spiritual, but that's not what I hear in the Christmas story or the Sermon on the Mount. I hear a call to say that humankind is our family and to remake the systems and hierarchies of the world so they no longer create scapegoats.

I hear the prophet saying that God is building a new temple for humankind out of all the stones the builders rejected. And if you think you're better than other people, you don't need to apply yet. You have some growing to do.

In this story, the symbol of the Virgin is right there at the center. There are lots of ways of approaching that. There are four basic interpretations, one of which I'm not going to spend much

time on. The traditional one, where the sky god sleeps with an earth woman, is not where I'm going today. I don't think that's the meaning of Mary's life.

The idea that she was simply a perfect vessel for a miracle ignores the fact that she was one of the greatest prophets in the entire Bible. When we silence her in our nativity scenes and we talk about "meek, mild little Mary," we miss the punchline of Christmas. She gives us disturbing insights that lead to a peace the world can't give or take away. The peace we're looking for doesn't come from hiding from the dangers of the world.

Herod is a big part of Christmas, but the story redefines the players. The people we treat as bit players become the central ones. The mighty are brought low, and the lowly are lifted up.

The second way we're going to look at the idea of the Virgin One is astrological, and that seems really weird in the church. I don't believe in astrology. It's fine if you do. But they believed in ages, and they were moving into was the age of Virgo.

And there were many songs in other cultures where they sang to the Virgin. The Virgin was linked to justice in a new age. Typically, in mythologies, different meaning systems are woven together, and you have to be very poetic to understand what they're saying. The idea that there's a new day dawning is central to the Christmas story. The people following the star were moving into a new age.

When you live in a colonizing empire, as we do, you can end up siding with Rome in the Christian story without even realizing it. If you're a law-and-order Christian, guess what? That's not what the manger symbolizes. All the authorities go to Jerusalem. They're at the temple, looking to the centers of power, waiting for the Messiah to show up there. And the baby is born in a cattle stall. That's one of the punchlines of the story.

Our president has blocked several countries, and I believe every one of them has populations made up largely of people of color. And this week, he showed that pattern clearly when he said he wanted more refugees from places like Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

The symbol is saying that the colonial powers of the world are dying, and if we identify with the same colonizing impulse that took us into Vietnam and Iraq, where we've tried to control the world and keep the colonial structure intact, we will be destroyed. That's what a prophet would say to us.

Somebody from Norway saw our president's beautiful words and wrote back. The reply letter starts off:

Trump said he wants more immigrants from Norway. I've reviewed the offer and I have to decline. The benefits package is terrible. You offer two weeks of vacation, if we're lucky. We get five. Your maternity leave is "Good luck," while we get a year. Your health care plan is GoFundMe, while ours is free. And your safety plan is just thoughts and prayers. Moving to the US right now feels like leaving a spa to work at a burning-hot dog stand. Thanks, but we'll stay in the snow.

Christmas is a message of hope, but it's also a warning. Yes, our borders are supposedly safer. But our water isn't safer. Our schools aren't safer. It's not even safe for a woman to give birth because of politicians who interfere in people's lives. And you cannot follow the MAGA movement without lying constantly. We understand that.

You don't like the truth of American history. You want the white supremacist narrative, so that's what you've chosen. You're beginning to stick Christian narratives into public schools here in Texas. But the prophets warn that a nation held together with lies will be destroyed by truth. The only way to love America is to repent of the lies we've been taught that make us think we're ideal when so many of our people are miserable compared to other parts of the world, and when so many have been mistreated since this country's founding.

I've said it before: racism did not come with Donald Trump. It arrived on the Mayflower. But the symbol of Christmas means that day is coming to an end. Do not lose hope. Patriarchy is dying because of its lack of truth. You have to lie to yourself to keep that system intact. It only takes one Steel Magnolia to let you know you're on the wrong team.

A philosopher named Yutang said, "*When little personalities cast great shadows, you know the sun is setting.*" When you have an administration with no journalists and only podcasters, you end up with no one who actually has scientific or medical knowledge—just conspiracy theorists. That ship is already sinking. No matter how powerful it looks, it's like a great jet without landing gear. When it goes down, it's going to crash into reality, and nothing will be able to save it.

The first message I hear in Mary's song is hope rising in what looks like a hopeless situation. If we leave the America that's dying and join the world that's being born, the message of Christmas is this: love will yet save the world.

The second part of the story is the idea of the word, *virgin*. That's a Greek translation. The Hebrew word there meant *peasant girl*. It was a great shock when the prophet said a peasant girl was going to give birth to the Savior, to the Messiah.

Mary sings, *The mighty will be cast from their thrones and the lowly lifted up*. Well, that's Antifa [laughter]. That's terrorism. That is the death of the old and the birth of the new. There's nothing you can do to save an evil empire, even if it's your own.

If you love America more than you love justice, you don't love America. You don't love the America of Thomas Paine. You love the America of Robert E. Lee and the Confederate States of America, because that's what we're talking about. The Bible Belt is also the Confederacy. Just because they wave Bibles and beat you with them doesn't mean they've ever read them. As a Christian, you are called to be a world citizen and to see Christ in every person.

Bishop Romero, the liberation theologian, said of our nativity scenes:

If we want to find the child Christ, the child Jesus today, we shouldn't contemplate the lovely figures in our nativity scenes. We should look for him among the malnourished children who went to bed tonight without anything to eat. We should look for him among the poor newspaper boys who will sleep tonight on doorsteps wrapped in their papers. In

taking all of this upon God's self, the God of the poor is showing us the redemptive value of human suffering. God is showing us the value suffering can have for redeeming the poverty and suffering which are the world's cross.

In liberation theology, the symbol of the cross means the suffering of the world. "Taking up your cross" means sharing the suffering in the world so that other people might be relieved of their suffering.

If you watch television or read magazines, you've probably internalized a hierarchy of worth and value for human beings without meaning to. But you probably think of the beautiful and the rich as more important. You didn't think your way to that point. It was an avalanche of propaganda.

If you can let go of that propaganda and recognize your own humanity and the humanity of the refugee, of the transgender child, of your entire human family, then the message of Christmas is that love may yet save the world.

Finally, Mary says, *God, through this child, will fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away hungry.*

Socialism is a particular chapter for humankind where we value human beings and nature over an economic system, where we choose people over property. There could still be markets, but we have to go through a radical transformation of what value is. We have to value people.

When Jesus began his ministry, he said, *I've come to preach good news to the poor.* Now, why would he say that? Why didn't he just say read the Apostle's Creed and I'll get back with you? [laughter]

It's not that love cares more about the poor than the rich, but to love both you have to redistribute the goods. You cannot have this economic system and call yourself a democracy. We can't even have this economic system and call ourselves *decent people*.

To let people languish, starve, and die of preventable diseases because we think there's a system that controls the universe, when it's our own decisions that make the difference... We have to go through a radical transformation of values, as Dr. King used to say.

The last image I want to lift up is that of the Vestal Virgins from Greece and Rome, women who held immense power. This wasn't like the American notion of Mary, deemed qualified because she had no experience.

These were people who were lifted out of patriarchy to serve the common good. They kept the flames burning. Mary kept the flame of hope burning. She hadn't given up on the hope that someday something would reshuffle the deck.

There were rumors in the ancient world that she had been assaulted by a Roman soldier. What an incredible juxtaposition if she recognized the holiness in that. She talked about her humiliation. If that assault became hope, if it became holy through consecration, if she refused to be defined

by somebody else's bad intent and instead lifted up her own sacred calling, I think that's a huge part of the Christmas message.

The final quote is from Howard Thurman. This is a quote about seeing Christmas and the people of our lives.

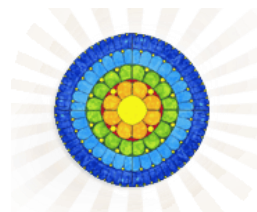
*When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost
to heal the broken
to feed the hungry
to release the prisoner
to rebuild the nations
to bring peace among the people
to make music in the heart.*

When we love like that, love may yet save the world.

Benediction

I believe that we're at a time that calls us to a new economic system. I like having a market. I like having a computer. I like having guitars. [laughter] I hope that part stays, but Christmas and Christianity call us to begin to value human beings more than we value financial hierarchies. That's a lot of the call of Christmas. I love the United States. I wish we weren't doing what we're doing in so many places. I hope we turn things around, but Christmas warns us that no empire lasts forever, that our true country is humankind. We must be loyal to justice first. And finally, as mortifying as it is to see what much of the modern church does to other people, I kind of like Christianity. I sort of chose that as a career. [laughter] But also, know that Jesus calls us to love, not to religion. These three callings help us to build a new world, help us to envision a new world, help us to work for a new world. So, as you go out into your life, please know that you carry loves with you that were here before you and will be here after you. The love that gave you birth, the love that's within you, the response to beauty and to tenderness with others, and that mysterious love that binds us to the plants and animals and minerals and stars. Those three loves that we symbolize as the trinity, go with you now and remain with you always. Go in peace.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

14311 Wells Port Dr.
Austin, TX 78728
512-251-0698
admin@staopen.org