

## Fall On Your Knees

Part of the "The Thrill of Hope" Advent Sermon Series

Luke 1:46-55

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December 21, 2021 — Service of the Longest Night

One problem with having heard the Christmas story over and over is that we all know what happens. There is no suspense ... none at all, really. The angel comes to Mary and says, "Behold, dear one. Behold, and do not be afraid — for you are going to bear a son, the son of God." Mary says, "How? How is this possible...? How will this happen?" Her questions are valid, but there is no suspense. We know she's going to say yes.

That's exactly what happens right before our reading this evening. Mary says yes, just like we expect her to. I think we are so used to her yes, and all that follows after it, that sometimes we forget how brave it was. Maybe she didn't really have a choice, maybe it was all going to happen anyway, but she chose to accept it. Maybe even to embrace it. I can't imagine how difficult it must have been. To have her whole life change, in an instant. To know that everyone would look at her differently from here on out, because she would be different, from here on out. To say goodbye to the plans she'd made and the dreams she'd dreamt. To trust that God was somehow there in the midst of all of it.

I think you are brave like Mary. You see, by coming here tonight, you have said yes, too. Yes to acknowledging your grief. Yes to being honest enough to admit there is someone you miss this Christmas. Yes to taking another step forward, even if it's on a road you never wished to travel. Yes to facing another day in this world, even when this world seems to be full of

every variety of everything wrong. None of those are easy things. So I see something of Mary's courage in each one of you.

It is on the heels of Mary's courage that we hear Mary's song. We call it the Magnificat. "My soul magnifies the Lord," she sings, "and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. He has shown great strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud and brought down the powerful. He has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things."

To the best of my knowledge, Hallmark has never put this part of the story on a Christmas card. They stand in noteworthy company that way. Back in the 1500s, Martin Luther and some friends translated the Bible from Latin, the language of church officials, into German, the language of their people. The Word of God is for everyone, they believed, and so everyone should be able to read it themselves. But when it came to the Magnificat — they initially left that bit in Latin, untranslated. History books tell us it is because the German princes who supported Luther's struggle with the Roman church took a rather dim view of the mighty being brought down from their thrones.<sup>1</sup>

And as recently as the 1980s, Guatemala and El Salvador declared it illegal to say these words out loud in public. Reading the Magnificat was punishable by law, because government officials noticed that whenever it was read, the masses of impoverished poor started acting as if change might be possible.

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Buchanan, "Revolutionary Words," *Christian Century*, December 12, 2012.

They started acting as if they might indeed rise up.

Here's why I think that matters to people like us on a night like tonight. The reason people have long been so affected by the Magnificat is because whether they are inspired by it or afraid of it, they understand how powerful it is. They understand on some very visceral level that these words are more than words — they are a promise, that everything wrong will be made right. And that that is no empty promise, but rather one that is filled up with God himself.

Six years ago, my parents moved out of the house I grew up in. They had lived there for over 30 years, so to put it nicely, they had a lot of stuff. They were downsizing significantly, and I came into town to help with the sorting and packing and selling. You may recognize where this is going — every time they were faced with a hard decision about something, realizing it wasn't going to fit in their new home, they would look at me and say, "Why don't you take it? We would love for you to have it. That way it's still in the family." Please take it, they said, to furniture and photos, kitchen paraphernalia I will never know how to use and the entire contents of my glitter-covered elementary school art portfolio.

I took some of it. None of the art projects, you understand, but some of the rest of it. But I had to say no to most of it, because I simply had nowhere to put it. My house, thanks be to God, did not have a basement. And you can't receive a gift unless you have a place for it. That's why the Magnificat is good news for everyone, even those who are so afraid of it. It promises that if you are so full up with the things of this world that there is no room for God, God will help you clear it all out, so that there is space within you for God to do what God does best. And at the very same time, it promises that if you come with too much space with so much emptiness that you are aching God will get right to doing what God does best

— where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.

I know that you are aching. You are here because there is an ache somewhere in your life. I know that for many of you, the ache is grief. And that means you would give anything to have your loved one happy and healthy and whole and right by your side. I know that's what you want more than anything, and if I thought for even a moment that I could make that happen for you, I would try with all my might. But Christmas — Christmas isn't about getting what we want. It's not even about giving others what they want. To experience Christmas in its truest sense is to trust that God can do this thing again — to trust that God can be born in me, in you, in this broken mess of a gorgeous world, with a love so strong it promises us that no matter what we have to face, in life and in death, we do not have to face it alone.

No wonder Mary sings. "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. He has shown great strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud and brought down the powerful. He has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things." There is some news so good, it simply has to be sung, which is why, like Mary, we sing our way through Christmas.

One of my favorite carols is one you won't find in our hymnal — O Holy Night. It is full of good lines, full of Good News: *Long lay the world, in sin and error pining, / Til he appeared and the soul felt its worth. / The thrill of hope; a weary world rejoices.* I could sing those lines all year long. But this carol has become one of my favorites in part because it says, *Fall on your knees.*

One of my friends, Michelle — when her mother was pregnant with her, her grandfather started a woodworking project. Her grandfather was a good man. He was acquainted with a few demons, as is often the case for those acquainted with war. But he was a good man,

and the prospect of being a grandfather brought out the best in him. Every night, he descended into the basement to work. And the more Michelle's mother's pregnancy progressed, the more hurried his work became. Her mother tried to reassure him, telling him there was still several weeks to go. "She might come early," he said, and worked all the harder. "You never know what might happen," he said.

He was right, in a way. You see, Michelle showed up right on time, and as soon as she was brought home from the hospital, she was snuggled into a beautiful wooden cradle, fashioned and carved and stained with love. The doctors would tell you she showed up right on time, but her mother would tell you she showed up a little too late, because just days after her grandfather finished that cradle, he had a massive heart attack, and he died, at the age of 56, two weeks before Michelle was born.

Her mother would also tell you that for quite some time, every day, usually multiple times a day, she would lay her baby in that cradle, and because it was so small and so close to the ground, she would crouch down with her knees on the floor, and rock her to sleep, one hand on her brand new daughter, one hand on the last gift from her father. Remembering those days, she says, "For so many reasons, that is the only thing I knew how to do."

There is some grief so deep, it takes us to our knees. But that's me telling you what you already know. You don't need me to tell you how to fall on your knees, or what it feels like to fall on your knees. But maybe you do need me to tell you that it's ok to do it. When the grief is so deep it takes you to your knees, letting yourself stay there is faithful. It honors the loss and the love that makes it so painful.

When Adolphe Adam wrote those words, he meant "fall on your knees" in worship. In gratitude and praise and thanksgiving. But I promise you this — if God is accustomed to finding us on our knees in

worship, then of course God knows exactly where find us when are there in grief.

There are plenty of people who don't care much for Mary's song. The powerful are brought down, the rich sent away empty; the lowly are raised up, the hungry are filled. You have to be able to listen to her words a certain way to hear them sung in the voices of the angels. There are plenty of people who don't care much for Mary's song. It's just that right now, none of happen to be in this room. Because grief has tuned your ears perfectly to hear the good news in her words.

So my friends, in these days and weeks ahead, fall on your knees if you have to. Because Mary's words are true — God will show up, and God will lift you up. Every time. That is the promise of Christmas.