



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
 December 7, 2025
 The Second Sunday of Advent
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Homily

Luke 1:46-55 (NRSVue)

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.

Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name;

⁵⁰ indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
 and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things
 and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has come to the aid of his child Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Homily

Advent faith is seeing things that others do not see.

Maybe, it might be said, sometimes even by you and me:

‘Advent faith is seeing things that aren’t really there.’

Take this bread for example. It’s a nice snack.

Ever since we moved to gluten free bread, sometimes it's a bit hard to get down. I can't tell you how often I've been thankful for this thimble of grape juice when I've had the bread of life stuck in my throat, right before I have to give a prayer.

And in a sense, that's all it is.

Maybe that's all it is.

What do you think?

Advent faith, however, tells us, proclaims to us, that it's more, right?

That this meal is a foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

That it is the bread of life, the cup of salvation, given to you, given to us, to sustain us as that Kingdom draws near.

Advent faith is seeing things that others do not see.

Just a pinch of bread, a swallow of juice.

The historian Kate Bowler posted an advent reflection this week on the Old English Practice of Wassailing?¹

You ever heard of Wassailing?

I didn't think I had, but then I found the song:

Here we come a wassailing...

You know, it goes, *Love and joy come to you, and to you a wassail too...*

I'm pretty sure, growing up, I heard that song and I thought it was about 'waffles.' Really changes the meaning of the song.

Kate Bowler describes the practice well in her devotional.

She says:

In old England, when apple orchards looked like nothing but [dead] sticks in the [snow], villagers had a strange December ritual. They tromped into the [barren] fields, sang rowdy songs, splashed cider at the roots, and shouted blessings at the

¹ Kate Bowler, "Advent Day 4: Wassail the Bare Branches." Substack. December 3, 2025.
<https://katebowler.substack.com/p/advent-day-4-wassail-the-bare-branches>

[empty] branches. The practice was called wassailing. Imagine standing in front of a tree that looks stone-cold dead and saying, "We believe you've got life in you yet."

She goes on to compare wassailing with Advent faith:

Singing to barren trees in winter, praying for a good harvest no one can see yet.

Advent faith sees things that others do not see:

The Kingdom of God in a little piece of bread.

The same could be said of our Scriptures today:

The birth narratives in the Gospel of Luke begin:

In the days of King Herod...

A bit later, we're reminded:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

Luke is reminding us, not just that these events happened in at a certain point in history, but at a certain *brutal* point in history.

It was a time when the world was divided up, between those who did the conquering, and those who were conquered. The haves and the have nots.

If you were a citizen, you had certain rights; everybody else was pretty much expendable.

And power was kept through vicious, public displays of violence, like Herod's massacre of the innocents or Jesus's crucifixion.

And everybody knew, that if the gods ever visited favor upon anyone, it was for the powerful and the elite:

Caesars Augustus, Tiberias, and Nero all called themselves 'sons of God.' Sixty years before Jesus, the official story was that Augustus was born by divine miracle. He claimed the god Jupiter himself was his father.

That's what everybody else saw and knew: a violent, unjust, unequitable age.

But Mary saw what others didn't.

She saw a world where God didn't just look out for the proud, the powerful, the oppressor. Instead, she saw an angel of the Lord visit her, an unmarried teenager in the middle of nowhere, saying, *Greetings favored one. The Lord is with you.*

*The Holy Spirit will come **upon you**, and the power of the Most High will overshadow **you**; ...the child to be born will be holy; **he** will be called Son of God.*

In the eyes of empire, Mary was nobody from nowhere. And yet, her child will be the son of God.

Seeing what others don't.

And then there's the Magnificat, those famous words:

*God has scattered the proud in the imagination 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.*

Notice, all those words are in the past tense, as if they were already accomplished.

Seeing what other's don't. I mean, really what other's don't. Look around you. I sure don't see that, yet:

God lifting up the lowly and bringing down the powerful.

But Mary sees God at work in her life, even if no one else does. And she responds, even if she's the only one who can hear the angel's voice.

You see, Advent faith is about seeing, yes.

But it's also about responding.

Living your life by God's call, even when it's just you, or just your community, who alone can hear it.

Even when everything else, in your community, on the news, even in your own life, seems to point in the other direction.

You and me, are no longer in Roman times.

Well...

I heard the church historian Diana Butler Bass this week on a podcast, saying that the times are more Roman than we think.²

You know, December, means in Latin, ‘the 10th month’? Which is weird, because by my count, it’s the 12th. Turns out it’s because the name December comes from the Roman calendar, which only had 10 months.

And today, Sunday, is from the Latin *dies Solis*, meaning the day of Sol, the Roman God of the Sun.

Turns out the times are more Roman than we think.

Even more than names on the calendar, Diana Butler Bass said, we also live in Roman times, because our age, just like theirs:

Celebrates imperialism, militarism, and economic superiority...of the rich over the poor.

Turn on the news, you see that celebration every day.

So, really, Mary’s conundrum, is yours and mine, too.

In that, our Advent faith, calls us to see something, that isn’t especially apparent. Asks us to see and, not just see, but respond, to something that others don’t see.

Advent faith calls us to draw from a hope that is hard to fathom:

When our halls of power celebrate might and domination over all else.
And, the tax code, benefits the rich over the poor.

And there’s also a messiness, not just out there but closer to home too, right?
A messiness of each one of our lives.

Things gnaw at you when you try to sleep.

² Diana Butler Bass and Katie Givens Kime, “The Secret Behind ‘A Beautiful Year’: A Different Way to Tell Time.” *Day1 Podcast*. December 1, 2025. <https://day1.org/articles/692d82956615fb6b0a009421/the-secret-behind-a-beautiful-year-a-different-way-to-tell-time-diana-butler-bass>

A fight with a parent, or, a worry about your kid, that you can't let go of.
 Bills piling up on the desk.
 Anxiety you feel around the corner, about the future.
 Or regrets you keep, about the past.
 Right?

Things that are seen.
 That others see.
 Things that you see.
 Or feel.

And yet, Advent faith calls you, at the same time, to believe that God is
 nonetheless at work in your life,
 and in this community,
 and in this world:
 God at work for love and for justice.

How do you do **that**?
 How do **you** do that?

I ask, because, you do.
 You've done that.
 You do it, even today.

A few weeks ago, in a stewardship sermon that Michael Yates gave, masterfully by the way, we asked you to imagine Jesus himself, in this aisle, telling you that what you have, what you give to this church is enough. It's more than enough.³

And, I wasn't here, but I bet nobody really saw Jesus, in the flesh dancing in the aisles.

But you all came forward, and you gave and you gave and you gave, like he was there anyway.
 Why? Because you believed.
 Because you knew: Advent faith.

I was thinking about that sermon, this week, when I heard another sermon.

³ Hear our sermon from 11/23/25 here:
<https://www.youtube.com/live/eMpc8SHgo4M?si=HEWEbPYtClonDpbE&t=2317>

This one was by a preacher who used to be at 5th Avenue Presbyterian in New York. His name is Tom Tewell. And, it was a sermon, on a completely different topic. A completely different passage.⁴

But he closed it, with this story, that I've got to share with you, about seeing, about responding to, what others don't see.

Rev. Tewell says:

He knew a man who was Catholic.

And he was very sick. He was in the hospital, dying.

And one day, he told his daughter, that he was having a crisis of faith.

He just couldn't pray. It didn't feel right.

So his daughter went to the priest and said, 'My father's got a cancer diagnosis, and he's not going to live very long, and he doesn't know how to pray... Would you go to the hospital and teach my dad how to pray?'

And, of course, the priest said, 'Sure. I'll teach him how to pray.'

So, the priest went to visit the father. He did it more than once.

And it must have worked, because, this man stopped talking, about how he couldn't pray.

And then, one day, he died.

And the daughter was left to settle all his affairs.

Like you do, when you lose your father.

And one of those things she had to do, was to tell his priest, that her father had died.

So, she went to visit the priest, to give him the news. To say 'thank you.'

⁴ Tom Tewell, "Life's Most Important Question." Sermon. San Marino Community Church. 11/18/21. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/community-church-sermons/id1608254278?i=1000623486605>

She said, 'I don't know what you did. But it must have worked. Because he stopped complaining, that he couldn't pray. He seemed like a changed man at the end.'

And the Priest told her, 'You know, it was the simplest thing. I told your father, if he can't pray, to just pull up a chair. And just talk to Jesus, like he's in the chair.'

And the daughter, when she heard this, started crying.

The Priest said, 'What? What's the matter?'

And the daughter, said:

Well, you know, I had said goodbye to my father and I went to get a bite to eat. When I came back, he had died. And his body was in the bed, but his head wasn't on the pillow. He had leaned way over and his head was in the chair.

This man's faith, that God is with him in life and in death.

Mary's faith. Your faith: Advent faith.

It sees things that other's do not.

It sees things, it hopes for things, it lives for things, others can't see.

Doesn't make the many less real.

If fact, they are so real, that they move us to do the most extraordinary things:

Like, they bring us to hope, even in times like these.

And, they bring us to gather,
 and lift up the lowly,
 and hold one other up, even in times like these.

And, they bring us to the Table.

To eat a little bread. And drink a bit of juice.

And say, and proclaim, and believe,
 that the Kingdom of God is near.
 The Kingdom of God is near.

Amen.