

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
18 December 2011**

*Advent 4B: 1 Sam 7:1-11,16; Cant 3;
Rom 16:25-27; Lk 1:26-38*

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Desmond Tutu was in residence for a semester at my seminary during my time there, and I heard him preach several times. One of those times it was on today's gospel passage. If you have ever heard this man speak, you know how magnetic he is. Most of his power comes from who he is and what he's done, of course, but part of his power just comes from his physical presence and his voice. He's a short, wiry man, with a voice that ranges from a soft high lilt full of wonder and delight, never too far from breaking into a giggle, to a stern baritone that must have been the voice he used in dealing with his opponents while working to end apartheid in South Africa.

He spoke in his sermon about how Mary responded—or rather how she did not respond—to the angel Gabriel's announcement. After describing how Mary heard the wondrous, astonishing news that she was called to give her body to God and give birth to God's Son, Archbishop Desmond pointed out that Mary did NOT say, "No, not me—I'm a nice girl. Go next door." Instead Mary says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

On that Sunday, Tutu's theme, as it always was whenever I heard him preach, was how and why we give ourselves over to God, to achieve God's purposes in the world. Somewhere in his sermons he always pointed out that while we believe that God is of course all-powerful, God is also at the same time profoundly and utterly powerless. God requires *us* to be God's arms and hands and feet and voice—and, in Mary's case, God's womb—to do what God intends for the world. God calls on Mary to commit to God's purpose very literally from the core of her body, from the depths of her being. In just the same way, all of us today—and not just the people of biblical times—are in a collaborative, co-creative relationship with God.

It is always a profoundly stirring message, coming from Desmond Tutu, this contemporary prophet, because we all know the immense system of evil that his voice, his faith, and his personal power helped to bring down. We all know how he collaborated with God to achieve God's purposes of justice in South African and in the world.

Most of us don't face problems of the same world-historical magnitude, and yet the response of Mary to Gabriel's announcement reminds us that God calls all of us—all of us—to commit to God's purpose from the depths of our being, with all our heart, with all our minds, and with all our bodily strength. We can hear in God's call to Mary not just a one-time-only call to bear a son, but we can also hear God's call to us to commit body and soul to do the work that God has given us to do.

Now soon after Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel, she travels from Galilee to Judea to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is past the age of childbearing, but is nevertheless pregnant with the child who will become John the Baptist. The two cousins rejoice in their blessedness, and Mary exults with the poem that we spoke today between the first two readings. Once again, we can't help hearing the theme of social justice in this magnificent song:

"He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat,
and hath exalted the humble and meek.
He hath filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he hath sent empty away.”

Justice and liberation from oppression is how the reality of God brought to life expresses itself. Raising up the poor and hungry and reining in the rich and greedy is how God’s justice comes into being. And in today’s world, when the gap between rich and poor is wider than it has been for a long, long time, we are in desperate need of justice. People from Tunisia to Egypt, from Syria to Burma, from Wall Street and Oakland, California to the little village of Wukan in southern China—people all over the world are crying out for justice. They want liberation from oppression. They want the chance to dig themselves out of poverty and hopelessness. They want not to be constantly ground down by the greed and corruption of the rich and powerful.

Marian Wright Edelman, the founder of the Children’s Defense Fund, has written a Christmas prayer that asks God to end poverty. I’ll just read selected lines. You can find copies of the whole thing by the Social Justice/Outreach bulletin board, or on the Children’s Defense Fund website. Listen and see if you don’t hear Mary’s song spoken into our own time.

Marian Wright Edelman, A Christmas Prayer

God help us to end poverty in our time.

The poverty of having a child with too little to eat and no place to sleep, no air, sunlight and space to breathe, bask, and grow.

The poverty of watching your child suffer hunger or get sicker and sicker and not knowing what to do or how to get help because you don’t have another dime or a car, money, or health insurance.

The poverty of having a job which does not let you afford a stable place to live and being terrified you’ll become homeless and lose your children to foster care.

The poverty of working all your life caring for your own children and having to start all over again caring for the grandchildren you love.

The poverty of loneliness and isolation and alienation—having no one to call or visit, tell you where to get help, assist you in getting it, or care if you’re living or dead.

The poverty of convenient blindness and deafness and indifference to others.

The poverty of low aim and paltry purpose, of weak will and tiny vision, of big meetings and small actions, of loud talk and sullen grudging service.

The poverty of believing in nothing, standing for nothing, sharing nothing, sacrificing nothing, struggling with others for nothing.

The poverty of greed for more and more and more, ignoring, blaming, and exploiting the needy, and taking from the weak to please the strong.

The poverty of addiction to more and more things; drugs, drink, work, self, violence, power, fleeting fame, and an unjust status quo.

The poverty of fear which keeps you from doing the thing you think is right.

God help us end poverty in our time, in all its faces and places, young and old, rural, urban, suburban and small town too, and in every color of humans You have made everywhere.

God help us to end poverty in our time in all its guises—inside and out—physical and spiritual, so that all our and Your children may live the lives that you intend.

To help us participate in Mrs. Edelman's prayer, I invite us all to imagine ourselves along with Mary, being called *by* God to collaborate *with* God, to bring, out of the very depths of *our* being, the reality of God to life in the world. I invite us all to imagine for ourselves in this time and place what justice looks like, so that we can begin to participate in the dream that God has dreamed for us from the beginning of time. I invite us all, in Advent 2011, to hear the good news of the gospel, the good news proclaimed throughout Scripture, as directly relevant to our lives today.

Finding the reality of God in our lives and in our world: that is exactly what God has announced to us is possible. "Greetings, favored ones," God says to all of us. In response to God's call, may our faith, like Mary's faith, help us to avoid the excuses—"We're too nice;" "We're too busy;" "We're too afraid." Like Mary, but in this time and in this place, may our faith empower us to answer boldly, "Here are we, the servants of the Lord; let it be with us according to your word."