

Unforgettable

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

December 14, 2025 – Sunday Morning Worship

Text: Luke 1:46b-55

*Unforgettable... That's what you are
Unforgettable... Though near or far...*

That's how one of Nat King Cole's most famous jazz hits first released in 1951 begins. I'd attempt to sing it, but I don't want to risk any copyright infringements!! This may seem like a curious title for a sermon, but when you pause to consider who – and what – this sermon is about, it makes total sense. Let's consider our text from Luke this morning in a little more depth as I explain.

First of all, what is this text which we just heard read and which appears reprinted in your Worship Resource? Understanding what it is, and why it is included here, has to be our first step. Anyone remember exactly what this text is? Who is speaking it and who is being spoken to? (*pause for responses*) Mary, Jesus' mother is speaking it and she is speaking to her cousin Elizabeth (pregnant with the baby who will grow up to be John the Baptist). Mary is visiting Elizabeth in response to the news she has received from the angel Gabriel that she is to bear a child conceived by the actions of the Holy Spirit, a child who will be known as the Son of God. A pretty fantastic story by any standard. Elizabeth is of course curious about all this and greets Mary by saying that the child in her own womb (John the Baptist) leaped for joy upon seeing Mary. It is in response to this greeting that Mary offers the words in this text.

Known as the Magnificat, Mary's words of greeting to Elizabeth are simply extraordinary. So extraordinary that it is, frankly, quite difficult to believe that an uneducated 14 year old

spoke them and that someone was there to write it all down. Or that Mary or Elizabeth remembered it all so well they were able to write it all down word for word in their later years. Possible, certainly. But not likely. Thankfully, whether or not this is historically accurate is not at all the point as we consider Mary's powerful words. They are, quite literally, unforgettable.

Still, what is this text then, and why is it so important. First of all, it is part of the birth narrative of Jesus as recounted in the Gospel of Luke. It provides more background on why the birth of this child is so very critical to the future of the entire world. Mary's words here are a synopsis, a preview – even a sort of Cliff's Notes if you will – of what the life's work of this baby she is carrying will be. We need to note that these words are as radical, as counter-cultural, as anything Jesus ever said himself. In fact, as listening to the news any day in our own time makes clear, Mary's words are still radical today. So, what does she say exactly? First, she makes it clear that, far from being afraid, she feels incredibly blessed that God has chosen her for this role as Jesus' mother. Then she goes on to describe this God in more detail, making crystal clear just what God is capable of.

Let's pause here for a moment and note the male language she uses for God which in recent years some on the more progressive end of the Christian spectrum have criticized as too "patriarchal." As a biblical scholar, I get this point and it is true to an extent but it is also precisely representative of the understanding of God in the world in which Mary lived. In other words, the original text clearly refers to God here as male, as she would have done. So, if we want to be faithful to the text, and not layer our interpretation onto the translation we prefer, then we must accept that God in this text Mary speaks is decidedly male.

Guess what. As a feminist I see this more as a limitation of human language than any kind of indication that God has a Y chromosome. No, just no. That reduces God to a human box and that is never, ever helpful to our understanding of who God is. So, in this text, and thousands of others in the Bible, please do not read “he” as “male.” That is not the intent. Any gendered pronouns for referring to the divine are simply indications of the inadequacy of language when it comes to naming a God who has no boundaries of any sort – gender, age, and the like. God is just God and the pronouns, male or female, just help us communicate about the divine more simply.

Now back to Mary’s words. What is she telling us about God in these unforgettable stanzas? First, she is telling us that God is merciful as well as outside of time: “his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” God is strong, so strong that God has “scattered the proud” and “brought down the powerful from their thrones.” This conveys that God is keenly aware of all the greed and violence which is rampant in the world, then and now. But Mary’s words don’t stop there. She goes on to describe what it will mean that God is aware of all the evil being perpetrated in the world by rulers who are corrupted by their own greed and sense of self-importance. After God brings down the powerful, God will then “lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty.” In these actions God is proving that God remembers all the promises God has made to his people in the past. God has promised to help those who need help and he will. God has promised to be merciful to those who remain faithful. God remembers. God will do as God promised. And this baby she is carrying is part of God’s plan to do that very thing.

Okay, now that we understand Mary’s message and can see for ourselves why it is so unforgettable, what does that mean to

us, right here and right now? Well, simply put, it means everything because Mary's beautiful, unforgettable words remind us that we are included in all these situations being described. Think about it. We know that corruption among the leadership in this country, and around the world, is virtually unfathomable. Yes, there are good folks working on our behalf in local governments, state governments and at the national level but they can only do so much when the leadership has an agenda that is self-serving first and foremost. That's why Mary's words describing the proud being scattered and the powerful being removed from their thrones is as meaningful to us as they were in Mary's own time. She is speaking to all of us at this very moment in history. This God she is describing is still our God today. And she is making clear the love and hope we find in God when we remember to look for it. This exploitation of the poor and the outcast, the hungry and the sick, is not and has never been God's will and it will not continue indefinitely. That is the wonder and promise of Mary's words.

Lest we get too excited as we anticipate some kind of *deus-ex-machina* experience where God just shows up and fixes everything for us, Mary also provides a qualifier on all these actions God promises. It's just one phrase and it's too easy to miss. It's back up toward the beginning of this little speech, in verse 50: "His mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation." Unpacking this qualifier hinges upon understanding one phrase – "those who fear him." Contrary to what too many conservative Christians claim, this does not mean God is harsh and judgmental and expects to be feared more than loved. Nope. Not at all. When we read in Scripture about the "fear" of God, we are once again victimized by lousy translation. "Fear of God" actually means that we revere God, we love God with all that we

are and all that we have. The fear of God is not a negative, a threat of punishment hanging over our heads like the sword of Damocles. If fear is any part of this understanding of God, it should be the fear of missing the whole point. God is, and has always been, first, foremost and always about love. And God teaches us over and over again, in Mary's words, in Jesus' words, in the words of Peter and Paul and all the apostles, as well as in the words of the Old Testament prophets and so many more one recurrent and powerful lesson: That love of those living at the margins – the poor, the outcast, the prisoner, the sick, etc. – must always come first. We must put it first in our lives and in our hearts.

Make no mistake, this is not easy to do in a world where violence and hatred of the other have become far too commonplace. In fact, sometimes it feels downright impossible. As I finish editing this sermon this morning, I am reeling personally from the news of the mass shooting at Brown University yesterday evening. Two students are dead, eight are seriously injured. The Brown community, which contains many friends of ours and Amanda's, is reeling. Indeed, the entire East Side of Providence – once considered the safest part of the city – is in deep shock. I am praying for my friends and colleagues on staff at both Central Congregational Church – just a few blocks from where the shooting happened – and Beneficent Church in downtown Providence. I am sure they are wondering what to do this morning. The East Side is still on lock-down but the mayor is encouraging folks not to let the shooting deter folks from continuing with planned events. I just checked their online presence and there is no notice about their plans for today. Honestly, I don't know what I would do if I had to make that decision. Actually, yes, I do. I would be here offering love, comfort

and support as I know they are as well. May our love and prayers surround them and the entire Brown University community.

Sadly, this was not the only mass shooting yesterday but this other news was buried by the news of the Brown shooting. The other mass shooting was at a place called Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia. At least 11 people were killed in this attack which targeted a Hanukkah celebration being enjoyed by a large crowd from the Jewish community there. One of those gunmen was killed and the other is in custody. Oh, my goodness, what have God's people become? God's tears must be flowing, God's heart aching even more than ours.

But here's the truly remarkable, truly unforgettable thing about this God whom Mary knew and trusted so completely. God never loses sight of God's promises to bring us – his Beloved people – hope, peace, love and joy – the gifts of God we receive and celebrate each Advent. Even this year, when so very much is wrong in this world. And here's how we know this is true. Once again, it's hiding in plain sight in Mary's words in the Magnificat. Where? Look at the tenses of what she is speaking. When she speaks of God's unending mercy, that's in the present tense – "His mercy *is* for those who fear him, from generation to generation." But, from there until the end of the passage, the verbs are all past tense. "Shown strength ... has scattered ... has brought down ... has lifted up the lowly ... has filled the empty ... has sent the rich away ... has helped." Dear ones, Mary is reminding us that these are not empty promises of what might happen one day in some far distant future. These are what God has already done and is promising to continue doing!! Put another way, these are not pipe dreams captured in beautiful words intent on making us feel better on really bad days. These are God's own promises, that God has already done. The Bible is filled with stories of evil being

overcome with God's power, of God's people surviving, even thriving, against all odds.

But, we ask, if this is really the case, why do these awful things keep happening? Why does God feel so distant from our lives today? Legitimate questions. But here's the thing. We will most likely not like the answer because it's a simple one. These things keep happening because we are not doing our part to make sure the good things happen and the evil things don't. How can I say that? Well, until very recently people in this country have been very complacent about voting, about paying attention to so many things happening in our communities that do not reflect how we understand ourselves. In CT and RI, we keep voting in folks who are not willing to change gun laws. Nor are we willing to do the hard work nationally of pursuing national common sense gun laws. We basically have just agreed to disagree, which solves nothing. All it does is maintain a very bad status quo. I am sure you can come up with other examples like this but quite frankly, this morning, this guns issue seems like the most important issue. And maybe it is. Because if we can get this one taken care of then maybe we can figure out just how to lift up the lowly and feed the hungry. Perhaps then Mary's unforgettable words will be unforgettable, because they have all come true as God's vision for how life can *and should* be is finally realized. How amazing would that be? And, even more importantly, what do we need to do ourselves to make this dream into reality for all of God's beloved people? Now that is something to pray about ... and to find a way to do. Amen.