**The Rev. Thomas M. Murphy**

**St. Thomas’ Episcopal Church, Owings Mills MD**

**December 11, 2022**

**Year A: The Third Sunday of Advent**

**Isaiah 35:1-10**

**Canticle 15**

**James 5:7-10**

**Matthew 11:2-11**

**Yes, Mary Knew**

Over the past couple of weeks I’ve had several conversations with parishioners who remember the days when Advent was a much more penitential season, more like Lent, more purple than blue, we might say.

Back in those days, Christmas decorations – including the tree – didn’t go up until Christmas Eve – unlike today when many people have had their tree up for so long that by a day or two after Christmas, it’s ready to go out the door.

Over time, Advent has lost much of its Lent-like feel, but it’s still there in the lessons we read and hear – Jesus’ vision of the last day when some will be taken and some will remain – and John the Baptist’s expectation that the Messiah would come with a winnowing fork, saving the wheat but burning the chaff into unquenchable flames.

And we get another reminder of Advent past today – on the Third Sunday of Advent – when we switch our liturgical color from blue to rose, signaling that this season of penance and preparation is almost over.

Rejoice! It is almost Christmas!

If you were here last week, you’ll remember that we were reintroduced to one of the main characters of Advent, John the Baptist – the prophet who prepared the way for Jesus, announcing that the Kingdom of God had drawn near.

John appeared in the wilderness, calling people to repent, to turn around, and offering to dunk them in the Jordan as a sign of their new life.

John was also unafraid to criticize people in positions of authority, like calling the Pharisees and Sadducees, “You brood of vipers!”

But, then as now, speaking truth to power can get you into big trouble. And in today’s gospel lesson we find John the Baptist a long way from baptizing the crowds who gathered at the Jordan. John has gotten on the wrong side of Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee at the time, and has landed in prison, facing a death sentence.

Earlier in the gospels, John had seemed to recognize Jesus’ identity – the way Luke tells the story – way earlier, even in his mother’s womb. But now, with his time running out, John seems to waver, sending some of his disciples to ask Jesus a hauntingly sad question, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Let’s leave John there for the moment and turn our attention to another, even more central Advent character: the Virgin Mary.

We didn’t hear her name in today’s lessons but we did hear her words, or, more precisely, we heard her song, the Song of Mary, the Magnificat.

The setting is what’s called the Visitation. The pregnant Mary heads to the countryside to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who in her old age is also in the midst of a miraculous pregnancy, carrying John the Baptist.

When Mary appears, the unborn John leaps in his mother’s womb, and, in this moment of great rejoicing – the miracle of new life entering the world through these two women – Mary sings her song:

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior…”

There is another, much newer, Mary song that some people like to sing and hear at Christmas. In fact, one of our parishioners has specifically requested it. It’s called, “Mary, Did You Know?”

“Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water? Mary did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters? Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new? This child that you delivered, will soon deliver you.”

“Mary, did you know?”

And, in case you’re wondering, the answer is, “Yes, Mary knew.”

Mary knew that God was about to turn the world downside-up, because she knew that God had chosen her – not a princess in a grand palace – but God had chosen her, a peasant girl from the sticks, betrothed but not married, to carry God’s Holy Child into the world.

And we know that Mary knew that God was about to turn the world downside-up because we have her song. Mary sings of God “scattering the proud in their conceit, casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty.”

Yes, Mary knew.

Mary knew that, no matter what people say, the gospel is political, that casting down the mighty from their thrones will not be easy and will only come at great cost – great cost for John and Jesus, and for their mothers, and for so many holy people through the centuries.

But look, today Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate and the other powerful men of that day are in history’s trashcan, remembered only for their cruel and bloody and futile attempts to imprison the Word of the Lord – and these leaders of the past should be stark warnings for the leaders of today who seek to enhance their power by hurting and killing others.

Yes, Mary knew.

And Mary knew that God turning the world downside-up was not just about overthrowing tyrants. It is a revolution of the spirit, a revolution that lifts up the poor and lowly – people just like Mary and her family in Nazareth – moving them from the edges of history to the heart of our story.

Now, all we have to do is turn on the news to know that this holy revolution is not yet complete but this revolution of the spirit is well underway St. Thomas’.

Last week I had lunch with Hizbullah, our first friend from Afghanistan. Those of you who had the chance to be here a few of weeks ago for his presentation or have met him elsewhere, know that he is a truly exceptional individual, certainly one of the finest people I’ve ever met.

But we did not know that when we signed on to sponsor him and yet we still took the risk and made the commitment. And the same is true about our second Afghan guest, Abdul.

When I stop to think about it, I’m amazed.

And last Tuesday evening I finally attended my first Christmas Outreach Extravaganza. Everyone told me that this would knock my holiday socks off and they were right – the amount of time and work that went into planning and setting up and cooking and sorting and wrapping and cleaning up – it’s extraordinary.

And then there’s the giving. On top of the 180 Thanksgiving bags from just a couple of weeks ago, so many of you gave so much for the people at the Community Crisis Center, Paul’s Place, the House of Ruth, Owings Mills Elementary, and more.

Some would look at all these people in need and say they’re not our problem – that their plight is their own fault - they should just get their act together, work harder, pull up their bootstraps and get on with it.

But because we have been formed by the revolution of the spirit, we don’t try to figure out who deserves what, we just give – we just give to people we don’t know and who will never be able thank us.

Yes, Mary knew.

Finally, back to John the Baptist.

When John’s disciples ask Jesus if he’s the one, Jesus points to the work he’s been doing: restoring sight to the blind, cleansing lepers, opening the ears of the deaf, raising the dead, and bringing good news to the poor.

This may not have been the saving work that John had expected – there’s no winnowing fork in sight – but it is the work that Mary anticipated and sang about with her cousin.

So, rejoice! God’s downside-up revolution had begun.

And, yes, Mary knew.

Amen.