**Mary’s Song** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Third Sunday of Advent The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:46b-55 Saint Paul, Minnesota
December 17, 2023

These are powerful words, revolutionary words. They belong *not* to Karl Marx, but to Mary.

Christians, you see, have always been uncomfortable with these words sung by Mary, in the canticle known as the Magnificat. I recall reading that when Martin Luther translated the Bible into German, he left the Magnificat *in Latin* because the German princes who supported Luther’s struggles with Rome took a dim view of the mighty being brought down from their thrones.

Advent, however, (sometimes) takes us places we would rather not go. It begins with a *sweet story* that has a decided *edge* to it. A young, unmarried girl was pregnant, and that was not good news. She was promised to an older man but then had a dream in which she was told that God had chosen her to bear a child. Unaccountably, bravely, Mary, perhaps only 14 years old, consented. *“Let it be to me according to your word.”* That moment of *annunciation* and *consent* has been painted many times, perhaps most strikingly in Fra Angelico’s The Annunciation in the San Marco convent in Florence.

But unlike the *demure, submissive* Mary featured in Fra Angelico’s painting, Luke’s Mary is talking about a *revolution*, an *upheaval* in values, an overturning of conventional mores.

Which begs the question: *What do those of us who are decidedly not poor make of this revolution?* We invest so much creative energy in *“want­ing”* that we become *economic units* listening to the cultural voices that tell us that *buying, having, and accumulating* will make us happy and content. In his essay *“Economics and Pleasure,”* Wendell Berry writes*: “It is astonishing . . . to see economics now elevated to the position of ultimate justifier and explainer of all the affairs of our daily life.”* Berry says: *“Decide to live by the laws of mercy and justice.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

The themes and metaphors of *Mary’s song,* however, are easy to apply to our American context. For example, [the Gilded Age is a term coined by Mark Twain and used by some historians to refer to the period between 1877 and 1900 in United States history](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=f11d3848ed06e8aeJmltdHM9MTcwMjY4NDgwMCZpZ3VpZD0xMTY5NGZkZC05OWE5LTY0ZTQtMTkzNS01ZjkwOTgwMTY1N2YmaW5zaWQ9Njc4OA&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=3&fclid=11694fdd-99a9-64e4-1935-5f909801657f&psq=the+gilded+age&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly9lbi53aWtpcGVkaWEub3JnL3dpa2kvR2lsZGVkX0FnZQ&ntb=1). [It was a time of rapid economic growth, especially in the Northern and Western United States](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=fc7fd069ee0ff5d4JmltdHM9MTcwMjY4NDgwMCZpZ3VpZD0xMTY5NGZkZC05OWE5LTY0ZTQtMTkzNS01ZjkwOTgwMTY1N2YmaW5zaWQ9Njc5MA&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=3&fclid=11694fdd-99a9-64e4-1935-5f909801657f&psq=the+gilded+age&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly9lbi53aWtpcGVkaWEub3JnL3dpa2kvR2lsZGVkX0FnZQ&ntb=1). [The Gilded Age was a period of immense economic change, huge fortunes made and lost, and the rise of disparity between old money and new](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=ce6adb169eca9283JmltdHM9MTcwMjY4NDgwMCZpZ3VpZD0xMTY5NGZkZC05OWE5LTY0ZTQtMTkzNS01ZjkwOTgwMTY1N2YmaW5zaWQ9Njc5Mg&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=3&fclid=11694fdd-99a9-64e4-1935-5f909801657f&psq=the+gilded+age&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuaGJvLmNvbS90aGUtZ2lsZGVkLWFnZQ&ntb=1). (Thus Summit Avenue and House of Hope!).

In business, powerful nationwide[trusts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trust_%28business%29) formed in some industries. *Unions* crusaded for the [eight-hour working day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eight-hour_day), and the abolition of [child labor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_labour); *middle-class* *reformers* demanded [civil service](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_service) reform, prohibition of liquor and beer, and [women's suffrage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage).

Currently (as many of you know) there is a period drama on Max (formerly HBO Max) called *The Gilded Age* that depicts this era. Here’s a description: *The American Gilded Age was a period of immense economic change, great conflict between the old ways and brand-new systems, and huge fortunes made and lost. From Oscar and Emmy winner Julian Fellowes,*The Gilded Age*follows a young woman who moves in with her old-money aunts and quickly gets entangled in the social war between them and their new-money neighbors. In a world on the brink of the modern age, will she follow the rules of society or forge her own path?* (It’s an American version of Downton Abbey).

But did you know that we are currently living through a new Gilded Age? It’s true.

Gideon Rose, writing recently for the Council on Foreign Relations, said: “There are clearly many parallels between then and now. Both the late nineteenth and the early twenty-first centuries saw technological change, increased globalization, economic growth, concentration of wealth, and rising inequality … Both eras, moreover, saw increased immigration, changing demography, and a decline in standing for less-educated rural whites. And both saw rising populism, racism, xenophobia, and anti-Chinese sentiment. In both periods, a conservative Supreme Court opposed government intervention and reinforced the power of the privileged while a sclerotic constitutional structure impeded reform. Both witnessed the growth of an increasingly raucous … public sphere, first in the nation’s streets and now on its information superhighways. And both featured national alarms over substance abuse and [terrorism](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/1999-03-01/it-could-happen-here-facing-new-terrorism) (alcohol and anarchism in the nineteenth century, opioids and Islamic fundamentalist terrorism in the twenty-first).”[[2]](#footnote-2)

There are lots of differences, too, but you get the point.

This reality, of course, has a huge impact on Philanthropy generally, and giving to religious institutions, as well.

For example, earlier this month, MacKenzie Scott, one of the richest women in the United States and the former wife of Jeff Bezos of Amazon fame, surprised six Twin Cities nonprofits with $26.1 million in gifts.

According to the Star Tribune: “Unlike most major philanthropists, Scott surprises nonprofits with unsolicited donations that often add up to record-setting gifts for them. The gifts are *unrestricted,* meaning that nonprofits can spend the money *any way they want.* They don't have to navigate lengthy applications or reporting requirements, as with most grants.

Scott, 53, has an estimated net worth of about $39 billion (according to Forbes magazine) and has pledged to give away most of it in her lifetime. But her generosity is shrouded in secrecy; she hasn't spoken publicly about her philanthropy, and the public usually only finds out about the grants when nonprofits disclose the news.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Amy Schiller, however, in *Daily Beast,* asks the important question: *Does this kind of Philanthropy make any difference?*

She said: “The first lesson we can learn from Scott’s … approach to philanthropy (and other philanthropists like her, both past and present) is that *giving* is insufficient as a counter to *injustice and inequality.* Scott has shown how easy it can be to redistribute cash. Redistributing power is an entirely different and more courageous project … However, there is something philanthropy *can do* that no other kind of money can. Though it cannot attack policies that enable the accumulation of wealth, the exploitation of workers, or the entrapment of people in cycles of debt and high costs of living, it can produce alternative spaces where people and communities exist beyond the reach of the market. Philanthropy can create *sanctuaries* in which we experience an alternative ethos of human worth, where people have an intrinsic—we might call it sacred—value beyond their utility to produce a benefit for others. The most powerful thing philanthropy can do is liberate spaces and experiences from the profit motive and make their benefits available to all.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

(Places like this!).

Hear the words from Mary’s Song again:

“God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 1:52–53) Mary’s words are aspirational words about the distribution of *power* from the perspective of a poor person*.*

Think about this in terms of something Katie Hines-Shah said a few years ago: “Middle-class America seems burdened with too much stuff. There are acres of self-storage units that no one seems to visit. People live in homes too full of things to get around. Closets are crowded, toy boxes too crammed to find something with which to play. When it's time to downsize, people find that a younger generation doesn't want the oak sideboard or the leather sectional of yesteryear.

What a relief it might be to middle-class America to be sent away empty! A clean closet, an empty garage, permission to be rid of Aunt Violet's heirloom vase--this is the stuff of dreams in the modern middle class.

Marie Kondo's book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* has made *giving things away* into an almost religious act. Her disciples wax rhapsodic about getting rid of cookbooks, sweaters, and obscure kitchen implements. People long to be freed from the tyranny of the thing unused, regretted, or purchased merely to keep up with the Joneses. *Perhaps Mary's song makes this freedom real.*

Less of a stretch is the song's promise to the *poor.* Mary proclaims *not* that they be filled with anything, but with *good* *things.* The mismatch of donor whim and actual need is acute. What if instead of making do with what was on sale, left over, fun to buy, or virtuous, the poor could actually have what they want for Christmas?

Some studies suggest that giving poor people *money* without strings attached leads to better outcomes. Despite common stereotypes, the poor don't waste money on alcohol and lottery tickets. Poor people tend to invest in what they need: *education, health care, housing.* Enabled to take charge over their own futures, their stress levels drop and planning for the future becomes possible. It is the fruition of Mary's song*: the poor are exalted when good things come their way.”*[[5]](#footnote-5)

Friends, (as it says on your bulletin cover this morning) “for both rich and poor, Mary's song is *good news.* Though the reversal of power might seem frightening to some, perhaps we can imagine that in Mary's prophesy lies a better way of life. The coming of the Messiah means we are no longer ruled by the things that so readily divide. We are free to become children of God, and thus kin to one another. We are invited to live into the promise now.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

In other words, it turns out what we really need for Christmas isn't more stuff, it's a Messiah. And he is coming soon.

1. John Buchanan, *Revolutionary Words,* The Christian Century, December 12, 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gideon Rose, *How Today is Like the 1890’s,* Council on Foreign Relation, July 16, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. #  Kelly Smith, MacKenzie Scott Surprises Local Nonprofits, Star Tribune, December 6, 2023

 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Amy Schiller, *Does MacKenzie Scott’s Philanthropy Really Change Anything?* Daily Beast, December 9, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Katie Hines-Shah, *Good News for the Rich and Poor,* The Christian Century, December 9, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)