

Welcome

Have you ever known you were supposed to speak up, but you stayed silent? I have a friend who works in a counseling office where she is the only white person - well, until recently, when they brought on another white woman. One day, not long after this other person had come onboard, she used a racial slur during a staff meeting. It was clear from how she behaved she didn't realize the word was inappropriate.

After the meeting, my friend had one of those post-meeting meetings with another of her co-workers. She asked, "Were you uncomfortable when she said that?" to which her co-worker responded, "Oh most definitely. That was way over the line."

Since they counsel a diverse community, both my friend and her co-worker knew someone needed to say something to their new employee.

I want to pause there because I imagine that you're feeling pretty awkward right now (I know when I first heard the story I did!). There are maybe 5% of people who, like me, aren't bothered by conflict. The vast majority of us squirm at the idea of having to speak up, especially in a situation like this, where the cause seems to be ignorance more than malice. It's one thing when someone's shouting slurs and brandishing tiki torches. It's quite another when it's someone who doesn't seem to know better, who you have to work with every day.

And especially at this time of year, with holiday parties and family gatherings, we seem to be thrust into those grey areas more often than usual. What do you say to that racist family member? Or how do you negotiate that coworker who doesn't seem ever to have heard of boundaries? What is our responsibility toward the *little* injustices? And do we ever speak up about those bigger injustices we see?

Believe it or not, Advent has something to teach us about living in that space. As we dive into the Advent story today, we'll find the answer to that question begins by finding ourselves in God's story. We learn when to raise our voices when we know who God has created us to be!

Message

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. Advent is a season of waiting and preparation. During Advent, we put ourselves in the place of God's people as they waited for the birth of the Messiah. By waiting in Advent, by choosing a season of simplicity before the Christmas celebration, we learn to watch for the small, simple work of God we overlook in the hustle and bustle of the holiday season.

Advent is a season of proclamation, too. While Israel waited, God sent prophet after prophet to say, "Hang in there... Stay alert! God is at work. Something new is coming." The prophets help us see God at work. This season, our Advent series is called "Raise Your Voice". We're going to look at how God has called each of us to speak up. What does it mean to bear witness to God's good work - in our lives and in the world?

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, how is God inviting you to speak up? Yes, you. Right in the middle of where you are. This series, at its heart, is about recognizing that God is with all of us, inviting all of us to speak up, to be bold, to share who God is making us to be.

We began last week with the reality that many of us don't feel *qualified* to speak up for God. We called it "imposter syndrome". And we saw through the story Mary the mother of Jesus that God calls us to speak up right where we are, no matter who we are.

Which begs the question, then, Where are we? Are you and I in the same space? In one sense, obviously, we are. But in another sense, we're very different. You and I come from vastly different experiences, backgrounds and even culture for many of us. When we say, "God calls you right where you are," that is going to mean something different for all of us.

We all gather around the same manger, hear the same Christmas story, but we all come from different places, different experiences and backgrounds. So *naturally* our stories are going to sound different. Our voices are going to sound different when we raise them.

It can get a little confusing when the way you talk about your experience of God isn't like mine. Since our experiences are all different, the key is knowing which story God is telling, and being able to find ourselves in it.

Turn with me to Luke 1. This is exactly what Mary did after the angel came to her. She visits her cousin, Elizabeth, who was also pregnant. Her son, who would become John the Baptist, still in Elizabeth's womb, reacted to Mary's presence. It's a beautiful, sweet moment, and in response, Mary sings one of the most famous songs of all time. Today, we call it the Magnificat, which is the first word of the song in Latin.

If there were ever an Advent carol, it'd be this one, though I think you'll notice for some reason we don't have a popular modern rendition. Let's read her song together, beginning in verse 46:

Mary sings,

"Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me. He shows mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him.

So far, so seasonal. But here's where the song takes a turn most of our Christmas songs don't:

His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones. He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. He has helped his servant Israel and remembered to be

merciful. For he made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children forever.” -- Luke 1:46-55

Scattering the proud, bringing down princes, sending the rich away empty handed... That doesn't sound much like a silent night, or baby Jesus sleeping away in a manger on a midnight clear. This is a verse about judgement, about God putting things right, addressing injustice, ending oppression.

And while it's not part of our Christmas preparations, it really should be. Because as God's people waited for the Messiah, it wasn't just so they had an excuse to get together and exchange gifts. For them, the Messiah's birth meant that God was putting the world right, and that included addressing injustice.

[Scripture Slide 2] Again and again, the prophets gave us visions of the Messiah that sound like Malachi. As we read his words, I want you to hear both the hope and the anxiety in his words:

"Look! I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

But who will be able to endure it when he comes? Who will be able to stand and face him when he appears? For he will be like a blazing fire that refines metal, or like a strong soap that bleaches clothes. He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross. He will purify the Levites, refining them like gold and silver, so that they may once again offer acceptable sacrifices to the LORD. Then once more the LORD will accept the offerings brought to him by the people of Judah and Jerusalem, as he did in the past. -- Malachi 3:1-4

Malachi recognizes that the Messiah's coming will be a blessing, but a painful blessing. Because he will *refine* us. He will remove all the parts of us that aren't holy and good. God will make us holy, make us a people of justice and mercy and peace and love.

That's good news and bad news. Good news because Jesus does it, we don't have to. Bad news because refining isn't a painless process.

This is the story of God. This is the story of Christmas: Jesus comes to us to make us into God's people. God is with us!

But God will for us means refinement. No wonder we leave out that part of Mary's Christmas song!

Here's the thing: Mary lived in a time where, as an unmarried Jewish woman, she was at the bottom of the social pyramid. She was part of a conquered people and lived in a patriarchal culture. I get why her song was good news for *her*. She was part of group who was being lifted up, exalted and fed.

But when I read the Magnificat, I get a little nervous. Because I don't look much like Mary. In my culture, I'm pretty much the top of the pecking order. I'm a white, straight, cis-gendered male who is a pastor. I occupy pretty much every position of cultural power and privilege there is. So if I listen to Mary's song and try to locate myself, well...

I'm a lot closer to the top than the bottom. I'm more like one of those people who's going to be humbled, sent away empty-handed. If I look like anyone in the Christmas story, it's more likely King Herod than Mary the mother of Jesus.

Which freaks me out, if I'm honest. When Jesus the refiner refines Mary and me, I have a suspicion it's going to hurt me a lot more than it'll hurt her.

So what do I do? What do we do if, when we locate ourselves in the Christmas story, we look more like the Herods than the Marys?

At its heart, Advent is proclamation and preparation. Because we know what sort of world Jesus is bringing to be, what he accomplished through his birth, death and resurrection, we can work toward that world.

We can announce that world through our words and our actions. So, if like me, you find yourself in a position of power or privilege, consider what it looks like to leverage that for the Marys of the world. If they're being lifted up as I'm being pulled down, why don't I go ahead and step down from whatever thrones I'm on?

Like Abraham, I can welcome strangers, not realizing I'm entertaining angels. Like Moses, I can choose to speak up to the Pharaohs of this world. Like King Josiah, I can insist on following the way of God even when those around me have no interest.

And if you're a Mary, you too can be bold, and speak up. Mary herself patterned her song on the song of Samuel's mother, Hannah - another woman who was ignored and overlooked by everyone except for God. Or you can be like Esther, a woman of two worlds, two cultures, who had the courage to speak up and saved her people.

Your story matters, both the good and the bad, the shameful and the praiseworthy. As Kathy Khang writes,

For many of us, there are parts of our story we have just recently discovered or have known and kept to ourselves. Perhaps those are the stories that bring shame or embarrassment to our extended families—the abuse, the mental illness, the Klan member, the prison time, the lack of formal education, the unplanned pregnancy, the prescription drug addiction... **We can hide what isn't obvious to others, but our stories, known and unknown, have a deep impact on us. They connect us to one another. They shape our voice.** -- Kathy Khang, *Raise Your Voice*

Remember my friend whose coworker used that racial slur? She knew that, of all the people in her office, she needed to be the one who had that crucial conversation. Because she was the other white person. As difficult and awkward as it was going to be for her to have that conversation, it was much easier for her than for any of her coworkers of color. She knew where she was, and she knew what that meant she had to do, how she had to raise her voice.

Friends, this morning, we need to ask God where we are. What is our location in the story of God? And because we know refinement is coming, we can begin that process of refinement in our own lives right now. Do we need to step up? Or do we need to step down? Do we need to speak up? Or raise up the voices of others? What crucial conversations have we been avoiding?

The good news of Christmas is God is with us. Which means we're not undertaking any of this on our own. When we choose to live into Mary's song, we're living into the story of God, and God is working in and through us to bring about peace in our world.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] All our stories become God's story at this table.

Prayer:

1. Where in God's story am I?
2. What does God's refinement look like in my life this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Ask God to locate you in God's story