Soul Proclamations
Singing the Magnificat with Mary

Featuring:
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Christopher Wells
Kate Moorehead
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Forward Movement
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On the day the angel Gabriel visited Mary, I wonder what she was doing. Was she packing her belongings, preparing to move into the house of her betrothed, Joseph? Was she finishing chores for her mother? Daydreaming, perhaps? Hanging out with friends?

Scripture doesn’t tell us much about Mary and her life before Gabriel descends with the amazing and surely surprising news that she will conceive and bear a son, the Son of the Most High. What we can infer is that Mary had been preparing in big and small ways her whole life for this moment.

She must have been prayerful. She must have been kind and helpful. She must have had a faith deep and unwavering. Otherwise, how could her response have been so magnificent? Most teenagers, perhaps then and certainly now, would have a different reply. Yet, Mary offers her self, her whole self, with humility and abiding faith. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

As we move through the seasons of Advent and Christmas, I invite you to journey with Mary, to listen
for God and to proclaim the Good News with joy. These daily reflections by five esteemed writers and faithful Christians approach the seasons of Advent and Christmas in different ways, from deep engagement with scripture to current examples of connecting Mary’s story to ours. I encourage you to read along each day, letting their words be a companion in your preparations, as you ready your heart and soul in big and small ways for the coming of Christ Jesus, the child in a manger and Savior of all.

Richelle Thompson
Deputy Director & Managing Editor
Forward Movement

You may use this book during any liturgical cycle (years A, B, or C). Because Advent begins on different dates each year, please start on the appropriate day for you.
The Song of Mary—**Magnificat**

*Luke 1:46-55*

My soul magnifies the Lord,
    and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
    Surely from now on all generations will  
        call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
    and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him  
    from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;  
    he has scattered the proud in the thoughts  
        of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
    and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
    and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,  
    in rememberance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
    to Abraham and to his descendants forever.
1 Advent

Watching and Waiting

Ray Suarez

Rafael (Ray) Suarez Jr. is an American broadcast journalist and host of Inside Story on Al Jazeera America. He is active locally and nationally in The Episcopal Church.

“T
here will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert
at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”
November 27

It is, after all, the beginning of the new church year. I guess Jesus’ strongly worded concern about knowing what time it is, what day, and the momentous things to come only makes sense. I love this part of the lectionary because we see and feel urgency in Jesus. He knows, as we now do, that his time on earth is short when he says these things to his friends and followers. Jesus appears to be insistently warning us about what appears to be not only the end of his earthly life but also the end of human history as it was known. Indeed only a few decades later a Jewish uprising brings down Rome’s punishing hammer, resulting in the destruction of the temple and the scattering of the Jewish people.

That’s why this passage, for all its passion and fire, leaves me unsure of what Jesus wants us to be ready for. We may not know exactly what is coming and when, but Jesus begs us to pay attention to everything, to hear the urgency of Creation, groaning with the birth pangs of his Second Coming. Jesus asks us to lift up our heads—encouraging us not to be fearful of these changes because our perseverance ends in our being delivered to stand before him, in awe and adoration.
My longed-for ideal is that God’s people are always wide awake, always on guard. For a twenty-first-century Christian, the world should not be a just-so story—with an endless train of confirmation bias, of seeking information that simply confirms our own preconceived notions. Neither should the world be blandly accepted as it is, a toxic, slow-moving river that leaves us shaking our heads and muttering, “That was then; this is now.”

If your eyes are open and your head is up, you’ll be ready for Isaiah’s “new thing.” Let us be Advent Christians, wide-awake, prepared, aware, always interrogating the times we live in. Catch some of the spirit of “Truro,” one of my favorite hymns:

Christ is alive!  
No longer bound,  
To distant years in Palestine,  
He comes to claim the here and now,  
And conquer every place and time.

(Feel free to do your own processional march to start your day—and this season of Advent.)
2 Advent

Preparing the Way

Christopher Wells

Christopher Wells serves as executive director of the Living Church Foundation.
In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’

“
December 6

In Advent, the Christian year begins again. What does this mean for us personally? It means that we have another chance to walk with Jesus and find that he is walking with us, along the way that God has “prepared for us to walk in” (The Book of Common Prayer, p. 339). In this way, on this road, God the Father helps us to “make his paths straight” by being born again with his Son, listening to his word, taking up our cross, dying every day, rising again to new life, and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As they are lived and followed by Christians, the original order of the events in Jesus’ life no longer particularly matters. Every aspect of the story is true, and each interprets the other. From our perspective in history, as we meditate on his passion and death, bearing the sins of the whole world, we know that he is also already risen. In moments of fear or sadness, in the throes of depression, or facing terrible pain and suffering, we may cry for this cup to pass from us—and find that the Holy Spirit has gone before, guiding our prayer, interceding “with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). If we do not know Jesus, we may anticipate meeting him for the first time, but he was always with us! In each way, God graciously shapes
us into the form of Jesus; and because we are mortal and sinful, with so much to learn, God in Christ comes to us again and again, making everything new. As the psalmist exclaims: “All my fresh springs are in you” (Psalm 87:6).

Along this pilgrim way, God gives us friends with whom to practice the praises of God, given in the glorious company of the apostles and the fellowship of prophets, with noble martyrs, and the holy Church throughout the world. With John the Baptist, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Elizabeth, and our own faithful companions, both those who are living and those who have passed away, we sing in gratitude to God: “My soul magnifies the Lord!” That is, I am in awe of you, Lord, and in awe of what you have done. I am in awe that you created me and grateful that you hear me when I call. This is the beginning of the response of every disciple: our preparation for the Word made flesh, again, in our own hearts and lives.
3 Advent

Proclaiming Good News

Kate Moorehead

The Very Rev. Katherine B. (Kate) Moorehead is the tenth dean of St. John’s Episcopal Cathedral in Jacksonville, Florida.
John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he
might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.
I wish I could sit down with John the Baptist and ask him to tell me about his life. What an autobiography it would make!

John is a fascinating character. In the Gospel of Luke, we hear of his birth to Zechariah and Elizabeth, prestigious Jews who lived in Jerusalem. Zechariah was a high priest in the temple. His son John would have had the best education, a solid religious upbringing, good food, and beautiful clothing. John was born into the elite class of Judaism.

The next time we see John, he is dressed in camel’s hair and eating bugs. Obviously, there was some major break between his childhood and adulthood. He gave up a life of privilege to serve God. For John, proclaiming the good news is about shedding all the social privileges of this world in order to rightly see and live into the kingdom of God.

John does not seem to be concerned with what anyone thinks of him. He has let that all go. For John, it is not important to please anyone but God. He always tells the truth about what he sees. When people come to him to be baptized, he can tell that they come only for security
and not for discipleship. Their cowardice and selfishness make him angry. John is fiery, untamed, and insistent in his mission and message.

What would John say to you if you came to him to be baptized? Are you ready to give your life to God? Are you ready to be hated by others if that is necessary? John said goodbye to a life of privilege and had the courage to say yes to God.
4 Advent

Be Not Afraid

*Thomas E. Breidenthal*

The Rt. Rev. Thomas E. Breidenthal serves as bishop of the Diocese of Southern Ohio.
In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God
my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the
lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations
will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great
things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the
thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from
their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with
good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to
our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants
forever.”
Today we are brought alongside Mary, as she races through the hill country to visit her cousin Elizabeth. She has just been informed by Gabriel that she is to give birth to the Messiah by the power of the Holy Spirit. No doubt she is motivated by the need to share what has happened to her, to seek the advice and encouragement of a trusted adult, and to sort out what is real from what she may have imagined in her impressionable heart. But Mary’s driving emotion is excitement: any self-doubt is the byproduct of her whole-heartedness.

Mary has received a call—one so sudden and so new that even now she cannot know for sure whether new life has been conceived within her. When she questions Gabriel—“How can this be, since I have not known a man?”—he says she will be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. Luke uses that expression only one other time in his Gospel, when he describes the cloud that envelops Peter, James, and John as they see Jesus transfigured in glory on the mountaintop (Luke 9:34).

Some have identified this overshadowing cloud with the dark night of the soul, the “dazzling darkness” we enter into when all the normal props of life are removed, and we...
are simply in the presence of the living God. Luke notes that Mary was among the disciples when the Holy Spirit lighted on them on Pentecost. Was this a reprise for her? Or perhaps nothing noticeable happened after her yes to Gabriel: I am the Lord’s servant—be it to me according to your word. In any case Mary believed what she had been told by Gabriel and proceeded accordingly. Can we who have been promised so much do the same?
The Rev. Christine McSpadden currently lives in London where she is a member of the clergy team at St. Paul’s Cathedral.
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.
And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

Singing the Magnificat with Mary
Behind all great people are many individuals, visible and unacknowledged, who helped them get to where they are—who mentored them, raised them up, pointed to them. They work tirelessly that another might succeed. They sacrifice their own ambitions that another might shine. They serve in the wings, preparing the way for another to take center stage.

John the Baptist prepares the way in the wilderness for the Messiah, clear in his mind that he himself is not the light but is there to play the deferential role testifying to the light.

Yet even before John prepared a place for Jesus in the Judean desert, Mary prepared a place for Jesus in the fullness of her womb and in the depths of her heart.

In older translations, Mary calls herself “handmaiden”: a woman who serves someone of greater station than she. The ancient Greek word translated as handmaiden is *doula*, which means servant or slave. The designation as doula implies that she belongs to someone greater than herself who is concerned for her welfare and to a household more comprehensive than her own. Mary’s historical title
as “slave of the Lord” in the feminized form parallels the masculine form *doulos* used to refer to the twelve apostles. In this sense, she takes up her role as apostle—one sent out in God’s name.

The more contemporary term doula pertains to a midwife or helper during or after the birth of a child. Fittingly, Mary is God-bearer, midwife, and handmaiden, opening herself as the Hebrew *Shema* prayer intones: spirit, mind, and body—with all of her heart, with all of her soul, with all of her very-ness. With an active obedience, she offers herself completely to the creativity and future of the divine.
2 Christmas

God is With Us

Christine McSpadden

The Rev. Christine McSpadden currently lives in London where she is a member of the clergy team at St. Paul’s Cathedral.
Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with
them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.
As you enter St. Martin-in-the-Fields parish church across from Trafalgar Square in London, you confront a remarkable sculpture by Mike Chapman. I have seen it many times, and it still takes my breath away and brings me to tears. Under the portico, outside the west doors, presides a large, four-and-a-half ton block of light grey Portland stone. The opening line from the Gospel of John is inscribed in the stone and wraps around the plinth of the block: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word became flesh and lived among us.” On the top of the block, hewn out of the rough surface, a life-sized baby emerges from the stone—an infant utterly vulnerable in his nakedness, chubby arms spread apart ending in tiny, clenched fists, plump legs kicking open. The stone breathes and pulses with this fragile babe, his umbilical cord still tethered to the rock.

I cannot help but think of my own newborn son, minutes after his birth, pulled from my womb and thrust into this world, fragile yet fiercely alive! I am amazed again and anew that God deigned to take human flesh, so that the Almighty might share the divine self so intimately with us. It utterly stuns me that the Creator God who...
fashioned all that is seen and unseen, the Cosmic God whose existence knows no bounds, the Infinite God beyond all time and space, the eternal God who is, who was, and who shall be from everlasting to everlasting, the Omnipotent God all powerful, the Omniscient God to whom nothing is not known, and the Loving God in whom everything brings delight, meets us at our most vulnerable in this most vulnerable form of human being.
About Forward Movement

Forward Movement is committed to inspiring disciples and empowering evangelists. While we produce great resources like this book, Forward Movement is not a publishing company. We are a ministry.

Our mission is to support you in your spiritual journey, to help you grow as a follower of Jesus Christ. Publishing books, daily reflections, studies for small groups, and online resources is an important way that we live out this ministry. More than a half million people read our daily devotions through Forward Day by Day, which is also available in Spanish (Adelante Día a Día) and Braille, online, as a podcast, and as an app for your smartphones or tablets. It is mailed to more than fifty countries, and we donate nearly 30,000 copies each quarter to prisons, hospitals, and nursing homes. We actively seek partners across the Church and look for ways to provide resources that inspire and challenge.

A ministry of The Episcopal Church for eighty years, Forward Movement is a nonprofit organization funded by sales of resources and gifts from generous donors. To learn more about Forward Movement and our resources, please visit us at www.forwardmovement.org (or www.adelanteenelcamino.org).

We are delighted to be doing this work and invite your prayers and support.
About the Authors

The Rt. Rev. Thomas E. Breidenthal was consecrated as bishop of the Diocese of Southern Ohio in 2007. With a Master’s degree from Church Divinity School and a Doctor of Philosophy in Theology degree from Oxford University, Breidenthal has served congregations in Oregon, Oxford, England, and New York as well as serving as a high school chaplain. He taught at General Theological Seminary from 1992 to 2001 and served as dean of religious life and of the chapel for five years at Princeton University. He is the author of two books, *Christian Households: The Sanctification of Nearness* and *Sacred Unions*. He lives in Cincinnati with his wife, Margaret Garner Breidenthal. They have two adult daughters.

The Rev. Christine McSpadden, a graduate of the University of Virginia and Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, has served in congregations from New York City to San Francisco. She currently lives in London where she is a member of the clergy team at St. Paul’s Cathedral. She has written several times for Forward Movement, including as an author of meditations for *Forward Day by Day*. She and her husband have two children.
The Very Rev. Katherine B. (Kate) Moorehead is the tenth dean of St. John’s Episcopal Cathedral in Jacksonville, Florida. As dean, Kate serves as vice president of the Episcopal School of Jacksonville, the Cathedral School Early Learning Center, Cathedral Arts Project, Cathedral Care nursing facility, and Aging True Community Senior Services, all nonprofits birthed from the cathedral. Kate is a graduate of Vassar College and Virginia Theological Seminary. She is author of four books, Organic God, Between Two Worlds, Get Over Yourself: God’s Here, and her latest book, Resurrecting Easter. Kate and her husband have three sons.

Rafael (Ray) Suarez Jr. is an American broadcast journalist and host of Inside Story on Al Jazeera America. Suarez joined the PBS NewsHour in 1999 and was a senior correspondent for the evening news program on the PBS television network until 2013. He is also host of the international news and analysis public radio program America Abroad from Public Radio International. He was the host of the National Public Radio program Talk of the Nation from 1993-1999. In his more than thirty-year career in the news business, he has also worked as a radio reporter in London and Rome, as a Los Angeles correspondent for CNN, and
as a reporter for the NBC-owned station WMAQ-TV in Chicago. He and his wife live in Washington, DC, with their three children. He is active locally and nationally in The Episcopal Church.

Christopher Wells has served as executive director of the Living Church Foundation since September 2009. He holds a Master’s degree from Yale and a doctorate from Notre Dame and edits The Living Church, a biweekly magazine with news and theological reflections. In 2014 he completed a round as theological consultant to the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue in the U.S. (ARC-USA), and he serves on the board of the American Friends of the Anglican Centre in Rome. He is a member of the Cathedral Church of All Saints, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
My soul magnifies the Lord

Join Mary’s proclamation this Advent as you let your soul sing the Magnificat with her. Walk with Mary as you prepare your hearts and minds and perhaps ready yourself to respond to Jesus with the same humble, gracious yes: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

The daily meditations feature the writings of well-respected faith and thought leaders in The Episcopal Church. Authors include Ray Suarez, a nationally known broadcast journalist; Christopher Wells, editor of The Living Church; Kate Moorehead, dean of St. John’s Episcopal Cathedral; Thomas E. Breidenthal, bishop of the Diocese of Southern Ohio; and Christine McSpadden, a member of the clergy team of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London.