## Advent Worship Service

Songs of Resistance and Hope

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## Call to Worship

## One: Our souls magnify the Lord,

## People: And our spirits rejoice in God our Saviour.

## One: For God has looked with favour upon us, and called us blessed,

## People: God is with us; God remembers the promises made to our ancestors,

## One: We sing to God, knowing that God will bring about justice for all.

## People: God is entering our world and our lives again in a new way.

## Hymn #123: My soul gives glory to my God

## Prayer of Adoration and Confession

O God of Elizabeth and Mary, you visited your servants with news of the world’s redemption in the coming of the Saviour. Make our hearts leap with joy, and fill our mouths with songs of praise, that we may announce glad tidings of peace, lift up the humble and the poor, and welcome the Christ in our midst.

But at the same time, we confess, O God, that we have not heeded Mary’s song to do justice and extend mercy to others, as you have extended mercy to us. We confess, O God, that the words of Mary are challenging, even frightening. When we ponder them, we confess that at times we are the proud, the powerful, and the rich, and are unwilling to reach out to the poor and hungry. May we live into your ways of justice, even when it is hard, and heed the song of Mary this Advent and Christmas. Amen.

## Assurance of Pardon

## God passes the gift of mercy down from generation to generation, always loving, always forgiving, always calling us to new life. We are able to live secure in your hope and learn to do your will, as we receive your compassion and welcome Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, into our hearts and into our lives. Amen.

## Scripture: Luke 1: 39-55

## Hymn #124: People in darkness

## Reflection

The Advent and Christmas seasons are among my favourites in the liturgical year for many reasons, but one of the chief ones is all the wonderful hymns and carols. I think this is true for most of us who remember singing these songs from our earliest years! I was trying to decide on a favourite, but there are too many from which to choose, and I keep hearing new ones each year.

As I was reflecting on this passage, and on Luke 1-2 in general, I was struck at how often the gospel writer includes songs as part of the narrative. Mary sings when she is greeted by her cousin Elizabeth (today’s reading). Zechariah sings when his son John is born, and his tongue is finally loosened, and the angels sing of peace and goodwill when they share their “good news of great joy” with the shepherds.

You might wonder, “Why all these songs?” Well, there are many reasons, but one of the key ones is because singing is an act of resistance. That’s not to say that all singing is, of course. Sometimes it’s an act of joy and sometimes of community but it’s also an act of resistance, a way of speaking out, of refusing to accept things the way they are.

African slaves in the United States and in other parts of the world knew this. When they sang their spirituals, they were both praising God and protesting against the masters who enslaved them but couldn’t keep them out of the promise of deliverance of the Bible. And the leaders of the American civil rights movement knew this too, singing songs like, “We Shall Overcome” in opposition to the power structures that kept (and still keep) them from being fully included in society. These songs were songs of resistance, songs of hope, and songs of confidence in the promises of God. Human history is filled with such songs of resistance against forces that would otherwise crush the human spirit and continue to subjugate the powerless.

The songs in Luke are songs of resistance because of who was singing them. While some might consider Zechariah to be an authority figure (being a priest in the Temple), he was still a Jew, part of a people under the tyranny of the Roman Empire. Elizabeth and Mary were even more powerless as women in a patriarchal society, one elderly and (up till now, childless) and one, barely a teenager and pregnant out of wedlock. The shepherds to whom the angels sang on Christmas night were the “lowest of the low,” considered ritually unclean and unfit to enter the Temple because of their work and their social status. But the angels sang to them as people “on whom God’s favour rests.” These people, in the midst of their powerlessness, dared to sing against the rulers of the day, dared to hope and have confidence that in God’s promises the world was changing, and that there would be justice and shalom for all.

The days are growing shorter and darker, and very often our spirits are “darkened” too, caught between the pressures of the season, the anxiety raised by the news headlines, and the falsely cheery “Christmas songs” we hear everywhere. Reading and recalling these resistance songs of long ago and singing the hymns of Advent and Christmas combine the realism of our world with the promise of Christ in whom “the hungry are filled with good things,” and the humble are lifted up.

Songs are powerful. A few voices coming together in song in late December may seem a small thing in the face of the worries of today, but surely no smaller than those two voices joined in the Judean hill country twenty centuries ago, singing in defiance of the powers of their day. God delights in taking what is insignificant in the eyes of the world to do extraordinary things in unexpected ways. That alone should encourage us to lift our voices and sing in resistance and in hope!

**Offering**

We may think what we have to offer God is small, but God works mighty things through the small and unimportant. Let us now bring our offerings to our God, knowing that we will constantly be amazed by what God does through them, and through us.

**Prayer of Dedication**

Most High God, for you nothing is impossible. Through a poor young woman in a small town, you gave birth to your realm of endless glory. By your Holy Spirit, bless these gifts so that they may bring your new life and hope to your creation, bearing witness to the promise of your word through Jesus Christ, who has come and is coming again to reign forever and ever. Amen.

**Pastoral Prayer**

God of new life, you amaze and transform, you create and make all things new. We come to you with prayers for your world and for your people. Help us, as did Mary, to magnify you as Lord and God of all.

Be the words for the speechless, the silenced, the oppressed, and the persecuted; and loosen our tongues to speak words of truth, justice, and comfort in the right time and place.

Be the might for the weak of hands, the feeble of joints, and the failing of spirit; strengthen us to serve in ways that are kind and generous.

Be comfort and solace for those grieving loss of loved ones, relationships, jobs, and hope. Help us to support, console, and encourage them through their struggles and bring them to God’s everlasting joy.

Fill the hungry with good things, refresh the thirsty with living water, restore the impoverished, and stir our homes and communities with your Spirit so that we work for equity and a just sharing of resources for all.

Be new life in places devastated by chaotic waters, winds, and storms; remind us of our responsibilities as stewards of creation.

Bless those who joyfully place their hope in you, those who nurture and receive new life and those who seek your Good News; and in this season of Advent, help us to again see the wideness of your mercy, the depths of your grace, and the expanse of your goodness.

And now we gather our prayers into one voice and pray as Jesus taught…recite the Lord’s Prayer together.

Hymn #121: Long ago, prophets knew

**Benediction**

My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.

For the Mighty One has done great things for me. Holy is God’s name.

May the love of God fill you until you overflow with joy.

May the coming of the Christ Child free you to live in a world

where the mighty are cast down and the poor are lifted up.

May the Holy Spirit empower you to work for the reign of God on earth.

At Christmas and throughout the year, may you be inspired to share

the Good News of God’s peace and love. Amen