

ADVENT & CHRISTMAS EVENTS



MAGNIFY

MARY'S SONG
AND THE MAGNIFICENT
WOMEN OF ADVENT

INTRODUCTION

Each Advent season, Christian communities return to Mary's song, often called the "Magnificat" because of the first word in its Latin translation: *Magnificat anima mea Dominum* ("My soul magnifies the Lord"). It's a kind of chorus for the church, an annual refrain: an angel visits an ordinary young woman, gives her good news of great joy – and she lifts her voice to sing!

Advent means "coming" or "arrival." It's a season of anticipation, of actively waiting and preparing for Jesus to arrive, and to usher in a new world. In Bethlehem, yes, and also everywhere else, too, including our homes, our lives, our neighborhoods. Mary's song, then, is about that day long ago; and it's also about all of us, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

The Christian year begins with this four-week season of looking ahead. You might think we'd kick off the new year with the trumpets of Easter, the wonders of Christmas Eve, or the fires of Pentecost – but instead we start deep in the shadows of despair, war, sorrow, and hate. For it's precisely there, after all, that God has promised to arrive – and so it's precisely there that God's church is called to light candles of hope, peace, joy, and love.

Our candles might seem small at first. And they are. Like all great journeys, transformations often proceed with small steps, little by little. One candle lights another. And as those lights gather and shine, with Mary, we can magnify them: notice them, extol them, lift them up for all to see. That's what "magnify" means – and that's what Advent means, too. It means gathering, and singing, and together becoming a great Magnificat.

For Mary doesn't sing alone. She sings with Hannah, and Elizabeth, and Miriam, and Shiphrah, and Puah, and Rizpah, and Ruth – and all the other people who magnificently "magnify" God's mission of love and grace, generation after generation, blazing the trail to Christmas morning and beyond. In this Advent devotional, we'll focus on a few of those magnificent women who cleared the way for Mary, and who can inspire all of us to join in the song of God's salvation, where the lowly are lifted up, the mighty are brought down from their thrones, and the hungry are filled with good things.

So grab your favorite Bible and most treasured songs of the season (remember: the point is to make a joyful noise!). Carve out some space and time for reflection, practice, prayer, and song. The shadows and the silence around us are real, and so are the lights and the music. Following Mary, we can lift our voices and sing: *Our souls magnify God's hope, peace, joy, and love!*

us, a young woman of vision, learning, artistry, and chutzpah. She is hopeful, peaceful, joyful, and loving. She was the first to believe the good news of the Gospel. And her world-turning "Yes" and "Let it be" come from the same conviction that wells up into song: her fierce, thoughtful, deep-down-in-her-bones trust that God's love, even now, is making all things new.

PRAY

God of hope, peace, joy, and love; God of Christmas morning, of Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the magi, the mighty and the lowly: we thank you and praise you, and magnify all that you have done and will yet do. Thank you for the magnificent women who have gone before us: Sarah and Ruth and Naomi and Puah and Shiphrah and Rizpah and Miriam and Jael and Judith and Hannah and Elizabeth and Mary – and all the other people, too, named and unnamed, remembered and forgotten, who have helped to pass down to us the Gospel, that radiant good news Mary was the first to believe. Embolden us to take our place among this great cloud of magnificent witnesses, to sing with Mary a beautiful song, a Magnificat for our own day. Thank you for Jesus, our Good Shepherd, our cause for joy, our Prince of Peace, our hope against hope. Welcome, Jesus, welcome! Amen.

Our souls magnify God's hope, peace, joy, and love!

Merry Christmas!

SING

Have each person choose a favorite Christmas carol!
"Go Tell It On the Mountain"
"Silent Night"



PRACTICES

- Light four candles, plus the Christ Candle. Keep a prayerful silence, and consider the four-week journey we've traveled together.
- Conversation starters: What's the greatest gift you've ever given? How do you think this Advent season has changed you? When you think of magnificent women doing amazing work in the world today, who comes to mind?
- More light: Read "Christmas Poem" by E. E. Cummings, "The Work of Christmas" by Howard Thurman, and "Taking Down the Tree," by Jane Kenyon.
- Who among your family or friends might be lonely on Christmas day this year, or missing a loved one? Reach out to them with a message of love – and Merry Christmas!

CHRISTMAS EVE/ DAY

LIGHT

Four Candles, plus the Christ Candle



READ

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. + Luke 2:1-7

REFLECT

Mary sings a magnificent song about God's magnificent love, cascading down through generations of magnificent women: from Sarah and Ruth and Naomi to Puah and Shiphrah and Rizpah and Miriam; from Jael and Judith to Hannah and Elizabeth and Mary, and on and on and on...

And what's more, Mary's story brims with recommendations for all of us who want to follow her lead, magnifying God's work of love and joy and justice. First, just as Mary learned from her ancestor Hannah, we are wise to devote time to studying the tradition we've inherited, even learning some of its key forms and phrases by heart. In this way, we can reflect on the ideas and actions of those who've gone before us, building on their good work in our own lives – and at the same time, we can learn to interpret and experience our lives through those ancient themes and patterns.

Second, when new opportunities and challenges arise, we are wise to follow Mary's example and intentionally seek out allies (like Elizabeth!), forming sanctuaries of love and mutual support. And third, drawing inspiration from both our forebears and our friends, the next step is having the courage to lift our voices and sing: for God's love, the radiant love of Christmas morning, is remaking the world!

With all this in mind, we can set aside once and for all the picture of Mary as "meek and mild." On the contrary, she is nothing less than a trailblazer for all of



MARY'S SONG: THE MAGNIFICAT



In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by these words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

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,
who has looked with favor on the lowly state of God's servant.
Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is God's name;
indeed, divine mercy is for those who fear God
from generation to generation.*





*God has shown a strong arm;
scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts;
brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty;
God has come to the aid of Israel, God's child,
in remembrance of divine mercy,
according to the promise God made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

*And Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months
and then returned to her home.*

+ Luke 1:26-56

WEEK ONE HOPE

LIGHT

One Candle

READ

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence. + Isaiah 64:1

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. + Mark 13:33

REFLECT

Advent begins in the dark – the natural habitat for candles of hope, looking ahead to Christmas morning. The angel Gabriel has just delivered his astounding good news, Mary has said, “Let it be,” and now she finds herself surrounded by shadows. Think of the vulnerability of a young, pregnant, unmarried woman in first-century Palestine (or anytime and anywhere!). No wonder she sets out, immediately and “with haste,” to her relative Elizabeth’s house in the hills of Judea for a three-month stay.

Scenes featuring women as protagonists with no men present are rare in the Bible, and Luke strikingly bookends the life of Jesus with two such



SING

“Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming”
“Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow”
“The First Noel”
“Jesus Loves Me”



PRACTICES

- Each morning this week, light candles of hope, peace, joy, and love. In prayer, name the ways you feel God’s love, and the love you have for others.
- The world is full of hatred, contempt, and indifference. Inspired by Mary and Ruth, take a bold step in the direction of love. Reach out to someone with whom you disagree, and look for common ground. Let go of a long-held grudge. Throw compliments like confetti – especially to those you might otherwise be tempted to criticize. Take part in the Spirit’s work of bringing love into the world!
- Sing: What are your favorite love songs? Try hearing them – and singing them! – this week as songs about God’s love for you, and for all of us (all creatures great and small!).
- Conversation starters: What’s the most loving act you’ve witnessed? Is it possible to love someone who’s done you wrong? What experiences make you aware of God’s loving companionship with us?
- More light: Read “Facts About the Moon” by Dorianne Laux, “An Avowal” by Denise Levertov, and “Love (III)” by George Herbert (the latter is a poem that reportedly caused the philosopher and activist Simone Weil to have a mystical experience of Christ).
- After the sun goes down, take a walk through a neighborhood glittering with Christmas lights, and feel the beauty and love in the air. Bring some friends – and make it a night of caroling, even if it’s just to fill the night with song!
- It’s not just that God loves us, and calls us to love God and each other. It’s also something else: God is love. In your Advent journal, reflect on how your experiences with love (both giving it and receiving it) are also, in this sense, experiences of God...
- Make Three: On an index card or slip of paper, write down three activities you love that you’re grateful for – and put it somewhere you’ll see it, like in your Advent wreath or up on your Christmas tree.

REFLECT

What does love look like? In scripture, again and again, love often looks like companionship: walking together along the way.

When David suggests that he build a “house of cedar” for God (in other words, a temple), God’s initial reaction is to remind David that since the exodus from Egypt, the divine quarters – “a tent and a tabernacle” – have been humble and mobile by design, precisely so the Israelites and God can journey together: “I have been with you wherever you went.” God even suggests that the reason God called David to leadership in the first place is that David was a shepherd, a companion accustomed to being on the move, “following the sheep” and caring for them at every turn.

And so Jesus, too, will arrive and love us not as a mighty priest enthroned in a temple, but rather as a “good shepherd” out and about, accompanying us wherever we go. This kind of mobile love recalls one of the most remarkable expressions of devotion in scripture’s library: when Ruth (one of Mary’s ancestors; see Matthew 1:5) pledges to her mother-in-law, Naomi, that “where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge,” Ruth does so not out of any self-interest or necessity, but rather out of sheer loving-kindness. Naomi has lost everything (a famine has swept through the land, and her whole family has died), and it would be much easier for Ruth to return to the community where she grew up; even Naomi urges her to pick up and go home. But Ruth resolutely insists on staying. *Where you go, I will go.* For Ruth (and for God!), that’s what love looks like.

And so when Mary sings her song of praise to God, she celebrates just this kind of companionship, the shepherding God has provided down through the generations, to Ruth and Naomi and countless others – and now, in a beautiful continuation of that loving accompaniment, to Mary. With her song, Mary praises God for the gift of a child who will be called Emmanuel, “God with us,” the Good Shepherd, the One who goes with us wherever we go.

PRAY

God of love, thank you for walking with us, for shepherding us, caring for us: going where we go, lodging where we lodge, dwelling where we dwell. With Mary and with Ruth, fill us with your Spirit of loving-kindness. Help us to take care of each other. In the shadows of hate, abandonment, and fear, let each of us become a candle, a bearer of light and love. Come, Good Shepherd, come! Amen.

scenes: at the end, the discovery of the empty tomb by a group of women, and here at the beginning, Mary, pregnant with God, visits Elizabeth. In this sense, Luke turns the marginalization of women on its head: at both of these crucial points in the action – birth and death, womb and tomb – it’s women at the center of the story.

And so when Mary begins to sing her song of celebration and praise, Elizabeth serves as both the original audience and a companion in the choir. For Elizabeth, too, is in the midst of her own astonishing pregnancy (like her ancient ancestor, Sarah, Elizabeth’s pregnancy happens when she is “getting on in years”). God’s promises are difficult to believe, even for so-called experts: for example, Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah, who’s also the temple priest, initially doesn’t believe (Luke 1:20).

But Mary and Elizabeth do. Filled with hope, they testify and sing. They “magnify” and rejoice in what God has done and is doing. Even more than Zechariah, they’ve taken care to “keep alert” to the signs of God’s arrival, the surprising, often hidden ways God “tears open the heavens and comes down.”

PRAY

God of light and shadow, heaven and earth, kindle a new hope in our hearts. Keep us alert to the signs of your coming: how you lift up the lowly, tear open the heavens, and let the daunting mountains of hopelessness, despair, and cynicism quake at your presence. With Mary and Elizabeth and Sarah, give us the courage to trust, rejoice, and sing. Come, Jesus, come! Amen.

SING

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”
“Come Ye Disconsolate”



PRACTICES

- Each morning this week, light a candle of hope. In prayer, name what you hope for. Which hopes do you hold most dear?
- Many people today are living with feelings of isolation, loneliness, and sometimes even hopelessness. Reach out to someone this week who might need a lift.
- Sing: Which songs give you a sense of hope for the future? Make a playlist, exchange playlists with a friend or family member, and make

arrangements to sing the songs (singing together on the phone works, too – or send a voice memo of you singing one of the songs!).

- Conversation starters: What signs of hope have you seen this week? When you're feeling hopeless, what helps you the most? If you found yourself in a situation of difficulty, who would be your "Elizabeth"?
- More light: Read "Annunciation" by Marie Howe, and "Hope is the thing with feathers" by Emily Dickinson (both can be easily found online).
- Pick a local organization that gives people a sense of hope for the future, and schedule some volunteer time this Advent season. Not sure which one to choose? Ask three people you respect, "Which local organizations do you think are most effectively giving people hope these days?" This question opens up lots of amazing conversations!
- Start an Advent journal this week, and begin by writing down the names of three women in your life, living or dead, who have "cleared the path" for you to thrive. Pop the list up on the fridge, bathroom mirror, or Christmas tree.
- Make Three: On an index card or slip of paper, write down three hopes you have for yourself, your community, or the world – and put it somewhere you'll see it, like in your Advent wreath or up on your Christmas tree.

WEEK TWO PEACE

LIGHT

Two Candles

READ

A voice cries out, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together." + Isaiah 40:3-5

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins... "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." + Mark 1:4,8



- More light: Read "a song of mary" and "mary's dream," by Lucille Clifton, and "Annunciation" by Denise Levertov.
- Spread the joy! With a little mischief in mind, spread some unexpected joy this week. Pay for the person behind you at a drive-through coffee shop. Put some quarters in parking meters that are about to run out. Anonymously leave a surprise gift for a coworker, friend, or family member. The more creative, the better...
- Joy is often the child of gratitude, and gratitude the child of mindfulness. In your Advent journal, reflect on the gifts and blessings in your life, the people and places and experiences and things you're most grateful for – and let the joy shine through!
- Make Three: On an index card or slip of paper, write down three people or places that give you joy – and put it somewhere you'll see it, like in your Advent wreath or up on your Christmas tree.

WEEK FOUR LOVE

LIGHT

Four Candles

READ

But that same night the word of God came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went... + 2 Samuel 7:4-9

*God has come to the aid of Israel, God's child,
in remembrance of divine mercy,
according to the promise God made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever. + Luke 1:54-55*



with God, demonstrates that she's deeply formed in Jewish tradition – and so was most likely the one who went on to instill in her son a love of scripture and of experiencing the world through scripture. Only someone profoundly familiar with Hebrew tradition, and in particular with Hannah's song, could have composed the Magnificat. Luke's point is clear: Mary is a young woman of vision, learning, artistry, and chutzpah. She interprets her life according to ancient patterns of divine action, and her song encourages us to do the same.

And to do so with joy! Hannah joyfully offers a celebratory song of praise, and Mary does the same. In this way, these jubilant, powerful women step into a mighty river of gladness, going back at least as far as the prophet Isaiah, who declares that God's Anointed comes with good news for the poor, the oppressed, the prisoner, and the brokenhearted – graciously giving them garlands of flowers, the oil of gladness, and a mantle of grateful praise.

PRAY

God of delight, God of celebration, God of good news of great joy for all people – help us to lift our voices in song. Even among the shadows of sorrow and despair, help us rejoice in what you have done and what you will do. With Mary and with Hannah, let us sing of how you lift up the lowly, scatter the proud, and fill the hungry with good things. Come, Jesus, come! Amen.

SING

“Joy to the World” (yes, it's an Advent hymn – Isaac Watts wrote it that way!)
“My Lord, What a Morning”
“Mary Don't You Weep” (check out Aretha's and Springsteen's versions)

PRACTICES

- Each morning this week, light candles of hope, peace, and joy. In prayer, name the joys you feel, or wish to feel, in your life.
- The world is full of sorrows. What invitation could you extend, what surprise visit, what hand-written note – to lift someone's spirits this week?
- Sing: Music and joy go hand in hand. Have a dance party (for one, for two, or more!) filled with as much joy and singing along as you can muster.
- Conversation starters: What's one of your most joyful memories? Looking ahead, what joys are you most anticipating? What's the difference between “joy” and “happiness”? Where do you see joyful signs of God “lifting up the lowly”?

REFLECT

Mary sings her song in a world riven by conflict, a wilderness of hostility and division. The poor are exploited by the rich, directly and indirectly. Roman soldiers are everywhere, emblems of imperial power and occupation, enforcing the *Pax Romana*, a counterfeit “peace” based on violence and fear. And now Mary is pregnant with the one future generations will call – borrowing a phrase from the ancient prophet Isaiah – the “Prince of Peace.”

Accordingly, as she sings, Mary stands in a long lineage of liberators, women who helped blaze a trail through the wilderness of conflict toward genuine peace and justice. Think of Miriam, Moses' sister, who sang a song of celebration after the Israelites' escape from enslavement in Egypt (Exodus 15:21). Or think of Elizabeth's greeting to Mary, “Blessed are you among women,” which recalls ancient words applied to Jael and Judith, two women famous for the parts they played in Israel's struggles for liberation (Judges 5:24 and Judith 13:18). The greeting thus frames young Mary as a liberator, too – not with a sword, of course, but with her trust, courage, and strength, bearing the Child of God into the world.

As we consider this lineage, it's worth remembering that the Hebrew word for “peace” – shalom – doesn't mean merely the absence of conflict. Rather, it means the positive presence of vitality and healthy relationships, a buzzing, blooming world of vibrancy and grace, justice and love. Ultimately, it's liberation into that world – God's world of shalom – that Miriam and Jael and Judith and Mary and Elizabeth and Isaiah and Jesus have in mind. This is a “peace” accessible to all: the valleys of division are lifted, the mountains of despair made low. Elizabeth's child, John the Baptizer, may baptize with water, but Jesus also will baptize with the Holy Spirit – the sustainer and reviver of life!

Think of Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives at the very outset of Israel's exodus story. Surrounded by violence and oppression, they are courageous guardians of life, defiantly protecting Israelite newborns from Pharaoh's murderous order (Exodus 1:15-21). And think of Rizpah, too, who insisted on guarding the integrity of human bodies, even after death (2 Samuel 21:1-14). Mary sings in this great tradition, this mighty stream of liberation: choosing life over death, peace over violence, dignity over contempt.

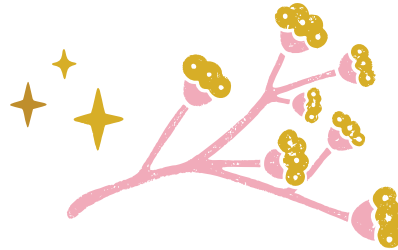
PRAY

God of shalom, revive us again. Give us the wisdom and courage to be peacemakers, the strength to make a way in the wilderness accessible to

all, the valleys lifted up, the mountains made low, the rough places plain. With Mary and Elizabeth, Jael and Judith, Shiphrah and Puah and Rizpah and Miriam – fill us with your Spirit and your shalom, for the sake of your vibrant, buzzing, blooming world. Come, Prince of Peace, come! Amen.

SING

“Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus”
“Spirit of the Living God”
“Down By the Riverside”
“Peace Like a River”



PRACTICES

- Each morning this week, light a candle of hope and a candle of peace. In prayer, name the kind of peace you envision. Which places, which people?
- Where in your life can you build a bridge of peace and reconciliation? A family or work relationship? A rift in your wider community? Take one specific step forward this week.
- Sing: Music can be a powerful source of peacefulness in our lives. Which songs give you a sense of shalom? Listen (and sing!) those songs this week, and find out which songs bring the most peace to a friend or family member.
- Conversation starters: What's your idea of a completely peaceful day? What specific steps would help shalom to thrive in your community? Where do you see peace threatened by injustice – and what kind of liberation is necessary? Inspired by the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah: what risk would you be willing to take for the sake of your deepest convictions?
- More light: Read “A Brave and Startling Truth” by Maya Angelou, and “Making the House Ready for the Lord” by Mary Oliver.
- Try a “Peace Sabbath”: choose a day this week and commit to transforming any conflict that arises into something constructive (not merely avoiding conflict!). Compare notes with a friend.
- In your Advent journal, reflect on where in your life you'd like to experience more of God's shalom.
- Make Three: On an index card or slip of paper, write down three people or places that need peace – and put it somewhere you'll see it, like in your Advent wreath or up on your Christmas tree.

WEEK THREE JOY LIGHT

Three Candles

READ

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. + Isaiah 61:1-3*

*God has shown a strong arm;
scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts;
brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty. + Luke 1:51-53*

REFLECT

In particular, Mary's song evokes and echoes its ancient forerunner, Hannah's song of gratitude to God for the newness of life embodied in her son, Samuel. Hannah is a strong, bold visionary, and her story demonstrates that she's well-acquainted with the history of Israel's relationship with God. First she prays fervently at the sanctuary in Shiloh, drawing scorn – and eventually, respect – from the local priest. And then later, thanking God for Samuel, Hannah joyfully sings of divine majesty and power turning the world upside down: God “raises up the poor from the dust,” even as “the bows of the mighty are broken” (1 Samuel 2:1-10).

Drawing on this ancient classic, Mary sings of how God “lifts up the lowly” and “brings down the powerful from their thrones.” In this way, Luke portrays Mary not only as poised and courageous, but also as learned and wise. Her eloquent hymn, so evocative of Israel's long-standing relationship

