

THOSE WHO DREAM

SERMON PLANNING GUIDE *for Advent-Epiphany, Year B*

Featuring Biblical commentary by
Dr. Marcia Y. Riggs

Guide developed by
Lisle Gwynn Garrity

INTRODUCTION

How to use this guide:

We hope this guide is your starting point for shaping your sermons, worship services, and scripture study classes. For each Sunday in Advent through Epiphany, we have included biblical commentary, guiding questions, and links to further reading. We hope these offer a few ways of approaching and thinking about the texts in light of our theme. You can find visuals and artist statements inspired by each of the focal texts listed in this guide in our Visual Art Collection (included in the Those Who Dream bundle). You may wish to use the visuals and artist statements in tandem with this sermon guide. Consider mapping out your ideas in our accompanying [Sermon Planning Grid](#).

About the Those Who Dream Theme:

In our study of this season's lectionary scriptures, the opening lines from Psalm 126 jumped off the page: "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream." What does it look like to live as those who dream? The prophets, the psalmists, John the Baptist, Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, Simeon, Anna, the shepherds and the Magi—they were all dreamers. They received, discovered, and responded to God's dreams for the world. In Advent, we step into the mystery and awe of God's dreams and pray they shape our reality.

This theme is for the dreamers in all of us—those who dream of a deeper connection with God and those who dream of a better world. It's for those who dream of comfort and for those who have given up on their dreams. It's for those whose dreams have been crushed and for those who show us that dreams take time. Join us this Advent as we dream alongside prophets and angels, Mary and the Magi. Join us as we seek and sow God's dreams for our world.

Theme Reflections from the Sanctified Art Team:

"Lately, I've had the most vivid dreams. I wake unsure of what is real and what are figments of my imagination. Sometimes it's difficult to navigate the space between dream and reality. In the midst of a pandemic and what Time Magazine calls, "America's Long Overdue Awakening to Systemic Racism," what is the function of dreaming? Dreaming helps people escape reality. There are those who dream, curating their own world, protected from news cycles, sirens, echoing cries, and responsibility. Dreaming helps people survive. There are those who dream, holding tight to the hopes of ancestors while imagining a better future for generations to come. Dreaming helps people transform reality. There are those who dream, resisting the status quo while fighting for a just and equitable world. Sometimes our dreams are small because to dream big feels frivolous. Sometimes our dreams are small because to dream big might threaten our reality. Sometimes our dreams are big because our lives depend on it. This Advent, how can we harness the power of dreaming? What can we learn from dreamers who came before us? How can we narrow the space between reality and God's dream—a dream imaged in the flesh of the Christ child?"

—Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman, Director of Branding, Founding Creative Partner of SA

The Third Sunday in Advent
THOSE WHO DREAM... *sow joy (joy)*

FOCAL SCRIPTURES Luke 1:46-55 | Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 | Ps. 126

THEME CONNECTIONS

Ultimately, dreams sow joy, even if that joy doesn't immediately spring forth. Sowing seeds into the soil always feels risky and feeble—how can something so small become something so beautiful, so big, and so nourishing? Like Mary, we are called to tend and nurture the dreams God has woven into us.

COMMENTARY ON LUKE 1:46-55 / *By Dr. Marcia Y. Riggs*

It is during a visit with her cousin Elizabeth—whose baby in her womb, John the Baptist, responds with joy to Mary's greeting—that Mary is moved to praise God in song. Mary's song wells up in her as joy because she feels deeply connected with Elizabeth—young woman to older woman experiencing redemption in and through their bodies. On one hand, in a culture where bearing children signified fulfilling one's womanhood, why shouldn't these women be overjoyed? On another hand, bearing a child in old age and becoming pregnant before marriage were reasons to diminish their joy. But they are faithful and believe that they have been chosen by God to bear children who will change the course of history.

Mary's song shows us that sowing joy emerges as we surrender to God's vision. Confirmed by Elizabeth's affirmation, Mary must praise God as she anticipates the fulfillment of God's promise to her ancestors and generations to come. God's realm may seem incomprehensible: those in power are brought down, those who are lowly are lifted, the hungry are filled with good things, and the rich are divested of their riches. This is a vision of a world turned upside down. But, hasn't God already turned things inside out when he chooses Mary to be the mother of Jesus? Joy, anticipatory joy, is the only response of the faithful.

Gospel singer Shirley Caesar sings a song entitled, "This Joy I Have." The lyrics are:

*This joy that I have the world didn't give to me
This joy that I have the world didn't give to me
This joy that I have the world didn't give to me
The world didn't give it to me and the world can't take it away³*

Today's text is referred to as the Magnificat, Mary's joyous praise of God. From the moment Mary is chosen to bear Jesus, we are made aware of God's solidarity with the poor. The song sows joy that is the seed of a social revolution.

—Dr. Marcia Y. Riggs, J. Erskine Love Professor of Christian Ethics
at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA.

³ Shirley Caesar, featuring Eric Reed. "This Joy I have." *Higher Ground Hurricane Relief Benefit Concert*. 2005.

The Third Sunday in Advent THOSE WHO DREAM... *sow joy (cont.)*

GUIDING Q'S

- * As you revisit Mary's Magnificat, recall the sequence of events that lead up to her proclamation of praise (next Sunday's lection moves us backward in the narrative). How do these prior events impact and shape Mary's song?
- * Dr. Riggs refers to Mary's expression as "anticipatory joy." How would you define anticipatory joy? What does it look like to live with anticipatory joy?
- * Sowing seeds is always an act of faith. Some of the seeds won't germinate at all, remaining buried in the soil. And if they do, some of the weak sprouts must be weeded out in order for their stronger neighbors to thrive. Seeds must be kept moist at all times or else they won't survive. A hard rain or rough winds can easily pummel them, pests can devour them before they have a chance to develop. And yet, our entire food system depends on seeds. All plants begin and end with seed. Often we think of joy as a big, full emotion. But what if joy, like seeds, starts small? What are small actions that help us cultivate joy?
- * Civil rights activist, Ruby Sales writes, "What's up with Mary? What does she, a poor adolescent unwed mother, whom the Roman Empire and her community press down to the lowest rung on the social ladder, have to sing about? Why would she thank God and celebrate the coming of a new child in a colonized world, where the Roman Empire, the most brutal and egregious of Empires, will close doors in an attempt to reduce her child's life to the barest bones of possibilities and options? . . . We expect Mary to sing a blues song with all of this happening."⁴ Why does Mary say yes—yes to carrying and birthing God's dream?

QUOTES & RESOURCES FOR INSPIRATION

"Mary's sung testimony of the hungry being filled and the rich being sent empty away reflects nothing less than a moral imagination where the world will be set right side up again. And so, what does this mean for us as an Advent people in this our time? It means that we must carry forth into the world as Mary did a moral imagination. A moral imagination is grounded in the absolute belief that the world can be and will be made better—it will be just. A moral imagination envisions Isaiah's 'new heaven and new earth' where the 'wolf and the lamb shall feed together' and thus as Mary sang, the poor and the rich shall be made equal. A moral imagination disrupts any notion that the world as it is, is the way it should be or ultimately is going to be. . . . What does it mean for us to be a people of Advent in this our time? It means that we must carry forth into the world a moral imagination of God's future and thus to really believe that the way things are is not the way that things are going to be, which means one must act accordingly. We must simply put, live into, and act upon our moral imaginations."

—Kelly Brown Douglas. "To Be An Advent People." Published on *Feminism & Religion*. December 16, 2014.
feminismandreligion.com/2014/12/16/to-be-an-advent-people-by-kelly-brown-douglas

⁴ Ruby Sales. "A Christmas Message." *The SpiritHouse Project*. December, 2007. spirithouseproject.org/reflections/reflection-2007-dec.php

The Third Sunday in Advent
THOSE WHO DREAM... *sow joy (cont.)*

QUOTES & RESOURCES FOR INSPIRATION (CONT.)

"The Magnificat recalls an ancestral promise and she bears witness, in her very body, to a God of promise. Today I call you to proclaim the faithful promises of a faithful God to this world and its people. . . . The end of the Magnificat speaks of a memorial to God's mercy in the text. That memorial was not a monument of stone, but the love of God poured into human flesh, woman-flesh, scandalously passing through scandalized flesh. Today I call you to be scandalous. Scandalously accept, love, serve, and nurture human beings in and not in spite of their bodies, their flesh, particularly those whose flesh the world disdains. Above all the Magnificat is political. It speaks directly to and against those enthroned in power. I call you to be political. Speak to those who can and will hear you and speak against those who hoard power and resources while others hunger and hurt. May God continue to write her story of promise in and through you for the hope and healing of the world. Amen."

–Wilda Gafney. "Live Your Theology Out Loud in Public." December 16, 2017.
wilgafney.com/2017/12/16/live-your-theology-out-loud-in-public/

"Here's what I think. I think it's easy to be joyless in this world. It's simple. It doesn't take much effort. You can put others down. You can dwell in hopelessness. You can even lob out negative comments on the internet from the comfort of your own home. The best part is that if you lack joy, you don't even have to do anything constructive. You can just dwell in it. But it is a whole lot harder to rejoice. Why? Because joy is hard. Now that may sound like an oxymoron. Joy is joy. Shouldn't joy be easy? I don't think so. Because I think joy is something deeper than that. But that also means that it's rooted. And it's the thing that remains in you even when everything else around you is crumbling down. It has been said by many, in many different ways, that joy is resistance. That is especially true in the worst of days."

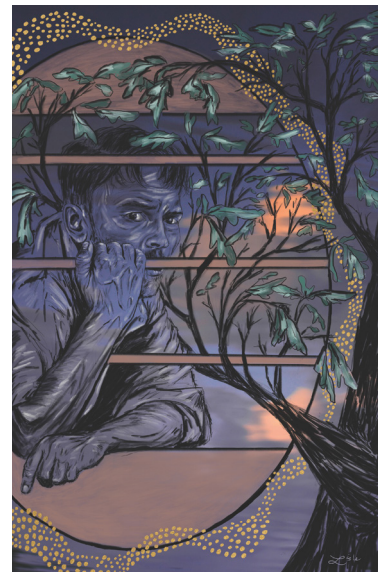
–Emily C. Heath. "Joy As Resistance." December 11, 2016.
emilyheath.com/2016/12/11/joy-as-resistance-december-11-2016/



CONTOURS OF MARY'S DREAM
BY LAUREN WRIGHT PITTMAN
INSPIRED BY LUKE 1:46-55



SOW IN TEARS
BY HANNAH GARRITY
INSPIRED BY PSALM 126



GOD OF JUSTICE
BY LISLE GWYNN GARRITY
INSPIRED BY ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11