

This morning I invite you to enter into some scenes of imagination, places that echo the feelings and longings of God's people 2500 years ago.

First, travel *ahead* in time, and imagine you enter a large gathering area. When you arrive, you discover no chairs exist, no pews, no soft cushions. Only a place to stand. Someone begins reading from the Bible, suggesting you stand there and listen, not just for a few minutes, but for the entire day—from the morning until the middle of the day. You can take bathroom breaks, get a snack when hungry, but you come back, eager to hear the words of scripture, read aloud again after many decades of silence.

You may find this scene hard to imagine, right? Who would want to stand all day long, listening to someone read from the Bible? Besides, we hear the word read all the time, so what's special about that?

Jump *back* in time several decades before the scene we just imagined, and imagine another scene that takes place now. After we leave worship today, we discover a giant spaceship sitting outside our building. We're all gathered up, including many others from our city, and we're transported to another planet. Most of

our possessions are taken from us, and for decades while in exile in this foreign place, we long for the stories of the Bible. Some of us begin to tell one another what we remember from the Bible, while others begin recording these memories on what fragments of paper we can find. Many of us begin to forget the stories, for paper copies of the Bible are rare. After several decades of exile, a new leader takes charge of the planet and offers us the chance to return back to Earth.

Those who still remember this building from before the exile return here. Those who were young adults or children when taken away are now adults, bringing their own children or grandchildren born on the other planet. While walking around the ruins, they tell stories of what it used to be like here. The building is in disrepair, falling apart, not safe to enter, but as someone searches through one of the classrooms, she discovers a dusty Bible and invites you to stand in the parking lot and hear stories you haven't heard for decades. I imagine you would be willing to listen for several hours, reminiscing about the times you heard

these ancient words read aloud in this place, rejoicing in your rediscovered past.

That's a bit what like happened 500 years before Jesus was born. God's people had been carried away into exile, not by aliens in a spaceship, by the Babylonians with armies. After several decades, a new leader came onto the scene. Cyrus, King of Persia, defeated the Babylonians and allowed the exiles to return home to Jerusalem.

Many traveled back to their homeland, rebuilt the walls of the city, and restored their place of worship. After having worked hard for many years to restore their city, the people gathered in the center of town. While standing on a wooden platform, the scribe Ezra read from their Bible, writings on scrolls that contained the teachings of Moses. The people stood listening to him read, from early morning until midday. While Ezra read, other leaders moved among the people, helping them to understand what they heard. It would be as if the elders of our congregation walked around asking, "Did you understand what you heard? Well, you see, it's like this...."

It had been several decades since the people had gathered for worship in Jerusalem. Some had been born while in exile, never experiencing worship at the temple in Jerusalem. During the years of exile the people had continued to worship God in their homes, remembering the stories of their faith, but they did not have their holy building for worship, nor did they have printed scriptures.

Imagine the excitement of that event when they returned and heard their scriptures read again after many years. They were willing to stand for hours and hours, listening to Ezra read God's words from the scroll. Imagine what it would feel like to hear some of your favorite Bible passages again after many decades:

- "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1)
- "Do justice ... love kindness ... walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8)
- "Love is patient; love is kind" (1 Corinthians 13:4)
- "All things work together for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28)
- "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him

may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Imagine what it would be like during this past Advent if we did not hear the stories of Jesus, if we could not have heard the wonderful words of Mary when she learned she was to give birth:

“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... 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” (Luke 1:46-48, 52-53).

These beautiful words, often called Mary’s *Magnificat*, have inspired hope in people for generations, for they speak about God lifting up those who are oppressed.

In the past century at least three different countries have banned the public recitation of Mary’s *Magnificat*. These governments considered the song’s message to be dangerously subversive.

During the British rule of India, the *Magnificat* was prohibited from being sung in church. In the 1980s, Guatemala’s government discovered Mary’s words about God’s preferential love for the poor to be too dangerous and revolutionary. The song had been creating quite the stirring amongst Guatemala’s impoverished masses. Mary’s words were inspiring the Guatemalan poor to believe that change was indeed possible. Thus their government banned any public recitation of Mary’s words. Similarly, after the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo—whose children all disappeared during the Dirty War—placed the *Magnificat*’s words on posters throughout the capital plaza, the military junta of Argentina outlawed any public display of Mary’s song.<sup>1</sup>

Even though we may not be facing exile to another planet or country, and no one has banned us from reading portions of the Bible, may we cherish the words of the Bible, as though finding them for the first time, discovering how God continues to speak to us through the stories as we celebrate our rediscovered past.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://enemylove.com/subversive-magnificat-mary-expected-messiah-to-be-like/>