

AUDEMUS

To Members of the Board of Trustees and Close Friends of San Francisco Theological Seminary

DECEMBER 2017

Dear Friends,

Our Advent devotions have been focused on Mary and her Magnificat. The theme – “the world is about to turn” – is taken from a popular Advent hymn written in 1989 by Rory Cooney called *The Canticle of the Turning*. The words are set to the music of an Irish folk song.

*My heart shall sing of the day you bring.
Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,
and the world is about to turn.*

In 2014, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of this hymn, the author reflected on the surprising reception the hymn had received. Here’s an excerpt:

“Songs get a life of their own after they’re written. ... What happens after I finish [a] song and start to share it, and occasionally publish it, is way out of my control, and perfectly unpredictable. While I was encouraged and grateful by its reception, ... I still felt some hesitation and self-doubt for using a completely secular melody with as beloved and sacred a text as the Magnificat, no matter how well-intentioned I was. But the fact that, twenty-five years later, it appears not just in Catholic hymnals, but also in Lutheran, Mennonite, and Presbyterian hymnals, ... says to me that maybe, for now, this was a good choice...”

The Magnificat is about God’s action in the world to redeem it; to take a broken world and mend it; to take a world that is seriously adrift and awry, and set it back on course; to repair and restore a tattered and badly damaged creation and its creatures.

And how does God do that?

- By choosing a young peasant girl to carry the promise, nurture it, and bring it to life.
- By entering the world in human form as a vulnerable child born to ordinary people in dire circumstances.
- By extending the promise to the entire world as a gift freely offered to all regardless of anyone’s race, color, creed, gender, age, IQ, national origin, physical abilities, lineage, educational attainment, wealth, or social status.
- By living a life that honors the dignity of every person.
- By being a champion of the poor and the marginalized.
- By remonstrating the powerful – the religious, political and economic elite – for their wanton disregard for the wellbeing of all.
- By renouncing violence and coercion, and demonstrating the power of love.
- By humbling himself in the person of Jesus, living the life of a servant of all and a slave to divine purpose, dying to sin, suffering for the sake of saving others, and giving his life that all others may live lives infused with his grace and truth.

- By bequeathing to every future generation the gift of his Holy Spirit to heal, guide, and empower our actions in the world.

This is the wonder of Christmas. This is the Magnificat. Through Mary comes God's song to humankind, and to us. And, as *The Canticle of the Turning* continues,

*Though I am small, my God, my all,
you work great things in me,
and your mercy will last from the depths of the past
to the end of the age to be.*

Here at San Francisco Theological Seminary we are still singing Mary's song. In times past it's sometimes been a wee bit out-of-tune, a teensy off-key, a little too faint perhaps, just slightly ragged around the edges. But that is true, of course, for all who profess to follow Jesus Christ, for the church universal and for our particular denominations, for seminaries and congregations, for those in pulpit and pew. At other times, the singing has been big, bold, beautiful, harmonious, and soulful. Nevertheless, we sing. We sing and the song echoes around the world. We teach the song and others sing it.

This past year, the seminary has continued to create a new kind of seminary for the 21st century. Enrollment is holding steady for our degree programs and we are seeing new students engage the seminary through the Center for Innovation in Ministry, which is blossoming and flourishing. We have moved more and more of our courses online, and we are now offering the MA in Theological Studies degree completely online. This fall, the Center for Innovation in Ministry launched the Applied Wisdom Institute (<http://appliedwisdominstitute.org>), which is expanding the seminary's appeal to social visionaries motivated by their faith to change the world. Our new certificate in Spirituality and Social Entrepreneurship will begin in February and is already nearly completely subscribed. Other certificates are in the works. In September, Rev. John Shaw from the Class of 1954 gave the seminary a \$2 million gift to establish the Shaw Institute for Spiritual Care and Interreligious Chaplaincy, and Rev. Joy (Class of 1976) and Dick Dorf gave \$500,000 to help speed our move online. These are just a sampling of the remarkable things that are taking place here at SFTS.

Our work here at SFTS is inspired by Mary's song and the promise it carries. Our life is rooted in the love of God, expressed so tenderly and vulnerably in the birth the Christ Child in a humble manger in Bethlehem long ago. Our future is in God's hands, which gives us hope and courage.

Merry Christmas!



Rev. Dr. James L. McDonald,
President and Professor of Faith and Public Life

P.S. – I have just received word that several SFTS alums are going to match one-for-one all new dollars given between now and June 30. I am deeply appreciative of the many ways you have offered your prayers, support, and encouragement for our efforts to create a new kind of seminary for the 21st century. Thank you!



San Francisco
Theological Seminary

In Christ. A New Creation.