



"The Magnificat"
Scripture – Luke 1:46-55
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, December 13, 2020

Picture Mary, the mother of Jesus. What image emerges in your mind? Throughout the ages, numerous artists have robed Mary in blue and pink, and have painted her as a demure young woman with a creamy complexion, a beatific smile, and her head bowed.

At Christmas, we sing, "**Gentle** Mary Laid Her Child Lowly in a Manger." The lyrics to another Christmas hymn reads: "Mary was that **mother mild**; Jesus Christ her little child." An apt description of Mary might be a meek and passive servant of the Lord. That would be an astute assessment if our image of Mary was based on the paintings of Fra Angelico or da Vinci or Giotto, Botticelli.

However, to fully embrace such a portrait of Mary, you would have to ignore the radical words she sang when she met with her older cousin, Elizabeth. Known as The Magnificat or Song of Mary, this young woman planted her feet firmly in the arena of politics when she belted out the lyrics of a dramatic restructuring of the social order.

Envisioning a new world, Mary sounds more like a headstrong Hebrew prophet than a mild and subdued handmaiden. Her song is the opposite of a sentimental lullaby sung by one who is sheepish. Her proclamation is bold and radical. It calls for us to hold a dramatically different perspective on the world than is commonly the case.

This passage of Scripture is so subversive that it was forbidden by three different governments in the 20th Century. Despite being a regular feature of the Anglican Evensong, when the British ruled India, they would not allow people to read or sing the *Magnificat*. In Guatemala, in the 1980s, the song became so popular among that country's poor that the government put an end to it because the words were deemed too dangerous and revolutionary. In Argentina, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo – whose children disappeared during the Dirty War – placed the *Magnificat's* words on posters. The government responded by outlawing any public display of Mary's song.¹

Scottish theologian, William Barclay, writes that *The Magnificat* eloquently highlights three of the revolutions of God.

- 1) "God scatters the proud in the plans of their hearts. That is a moral revolution."
- 2) "God casts down the mighty and exalts the lowly. That is a social revolution."
- 3) "God has filled those who are hungry but those who are rich are sent away empty." That is an economic revolution.²

First, God "scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts." Or, as *The Message* version translates it: "God scatters the bluffing braggarts." We live in an age of self-importance and arrogance. People are quick to tout their every accomplishment on Facebook or to express their opinion on Twitter. But every spiritual tradition teaches that the path to inner peace and an authentic life begins with humility. Your heart, mind, and soul are out of sync with God if you are self-centered. Theologian Joan Chittister writes, "The full truth of what it means to be spiritual, to be 'of God,' to be a force in the world for equality, justice, compassion, and human dignity depends on...humility."³

Second, God "brings down the powerful from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly." Or as *The Message* puts it: "God knocks tyrants off their high horses, and pulls victims out of the mud." While the world honors people for their rank – be it title, position, or popularity, God does not.

God is not the least impressed with one's social ranking. Each person is a child of God and created in God's image. We choose to embrace that image and live fully into it or we choose to live at cross purposes with it.

God judges our hearts and our actions. Those who wield power are not to use it simply for the benefit of their friends and supporters. Rather, they are to remember the forgotten and to lift those who are overlooked.

Third, God "fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty." Or, according to *The Message*, "the starving poor will sit down at a banquet and the callous rich will be left out in the cold." According to the prophets and Jesus, God has a special concern for the poor and those who are treated unjustly. Anyone who lives in harmony with the ways of God strives to right the wrongs in our world. That includes narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor. I cannot help but think that this passage was part of the inspiration for Charles Dickens when he wrote "A Christmas Carol," the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, the miserly businessman described as "a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone." Scrooge was a hard man with a hard heart. He was a man who knew how to make money, but not friends; who knew how to earn riches, but was clueless in creating a rich life. And in his later years, his nightmares predicted that he was going to be one of those callous rich who would be sent away empty.

It seems obvious that Mary not only sang this song to her cousin in the days she was expecting Jesus, but also sang it to her little boy when he was growing up. Although it is unlike the lullabies we sing to our children, perhaps this was the bedtime song on which Jesus was reared. When he became a man, Jesus echoed his mother's song again and again. He warned the rich not to put their trust in their wealth, he blessed the poor, he brought outcasts into the fold, and he planted the seeds of peaceful revolution to topple the oppressors. It makes sense to me that Jesus grew up hearing his mother's version of "We Shall Overcome."

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson, writes: "People in need in every society hear a blessing in this canticle. The battered woman, the single parent without resources, those without food on the table or without even a table, the homeless family, the young abandoned to their own devices, the old who are discarded: all are encompassed in the hope Mary proclaims."

One seminary professor throws out a provocative question for us to consider: What if the little girl who plays Mary in the Christmas pageant were not the meek and gentle handmaiden painted by the artists, but rather the Mary who sings the Magnificat proclaiming the news that God's reign has broken the status quo?⁴ Rather than a blushing young girl robed in beautiful blue and pink linen, Mary might be dressed in blue jeans and a bright pink fitness shirt. One hand would be a fist thrust high in protest, the other would hold a sign calling for moral, social, and economic justice.

Michael Gerson, who served in the George W. Bush White House and now writes op-eds for *The Washington Post*, mentioned this Song of Mary in a piece he wrote about Advent. He noted that whether liberal or conservative, our politics seem more focused on avoiding nightmares than pursuing dreams. The underlying message of most political fundraising appeals is: "Respond now, or the apocalypse is upon us!"

"Sustaining this type of distressed uncertainty for long periods is like putting arsenic in your saltshaker. It is a self-administered poison. It kills peace, gratitude and contentment. It undermines mental and physical health...Evil and conflict are real but not ultimate. Grace and deliverance are unrealized but certain...(We live in hope) because the trajectory of history is tilted upward by a powerful hand...(Mary's song) is the fullest expression of the hope of Advent – that all wrongs will finally be righted, that all the scales will eventually balance and that no one will be exploited or afraid."⁵

Living as we are amid a global pandemic, with racial tensions high and political divisions tearing at the fabric of our nation, hope is in short supply. Further, a basic law of the universe is perpetual perishing – that is, nothing lasts forever. Yet, we refuse to surrender to despair. There are longings in our soul, whispers in our minds of a better day.

As Mary was on the verge of giving birth to Jesus, God inspired her with words that were passionate and prophetic. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of the one who taught compassion, justice and peace, might we pray for God to embolden us to find our voice?

NOTES

1. Kairoscenter.org
2. William Barclay, *Daily Devotions with William Barclay*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press: 2008), p. 375
3. Joan Chittister, *Radical Spirit*, (New York: Convergent Books, 2017), p.16.
4. Gail A. Ricciuti, "Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), p.83.
5. Michael Gerson, "Advent Teaches Us That Hope is Not a Cruel Joke," *The Washington Post*, December 5, 2019.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

O God our Savior — Our hearts are startled by the magnitude of your blessing, and our spirits rejoice in your mercy. With both whispered hopes and shouts of joy, we echo Mary's song as we praise you, Mighty and Merciful One, and bring our prayers before you.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for that day when your peace flourishes in our weary world, a day when all people will be treated with dignity and compassion. We lift before you all those who are feared as strangers, who are mocked for their difference, who find no welcome among us. (*Silence*)

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for that day when your love grows in our weary world — a day when hunger is no more, when food is accessible to all, when no child's dream is squelched because of a poverty of resources or imagination. We lift before you those whose hopes are routinely trampled, whose opportunities are limited by systems that are unresponsive to either need or possibility. (*Silence*)

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for that day when your hope blooms again for a world wearied by human appetites, a day when creation is renewed and stewardship is understood as a divine trust. We lift before you the plight of ecosystems stressed by climate change, and the challenges of environments exploited. *(Silence)*

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for that day, O Lord, when joy will take deep root, and all of creation will join in Mary's song, a day when all know the justice, abundance, and wholeness of your *shalom*. We lift before you all who yearn for justice, who know want, who suffer illness or brokenness or grief. *(Silence)*

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of surprise, God of promise—you turn the world upside down and invite us to be agents of your change. Move us away from complicity with the proud and the powerful; move us toward a joyful and faith-filled "yes" to your vision of wholeness.

This we pray in the name of Mary's Son, Jesus the Christ, who gave us words to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

**The structure and imagery of this prayer borrows heavily from the text of "Light Dawns on a Weary World" by Mary Louise Bringle (2001), published in Glory to God (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).*