

The Stewardship of Holiness

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Luke 1:26-38, 46-56

The Bible comes at us in multiple ways and forms, curated over many centuries. Yet core themes persist. One core theme is that God chooses unlikely, unexpected people to carry God's unlikely, unexpected message. As we gather here again in a few hours that becomes our central affirmation – a tiny, vulnerable baby, born in poverty in a remote corner of the world, then becoming a refugee, who will rule the world with truth and grace.

But there are other unlikely, unexpected messengers, of course. Author Kathleen Norris makes the observation “that Protestants have a limited attention span for Mary, the mother of Jesus. We unpack her from the box at Christmastime, and then pack her back up again, with our other decorations, after the holidays are over.” (*Presbyterians Today*, April 2004)

Yet in a #metoo, glass-ceilinged world, then, and now, we remember that God chose this woman to bear the good news that we will soon celebrate. Unlikely, unexpected messengers to carry an unlikely, unexpected message.

We know the story well. Hear it again, perhaps as for the first time.

“The Angel Gabriel”

1 The Angel Gabriel from heaven came,/ his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame;/'All hail,' said he, 'thou lowly maiden Mary,/most highly favored lady.'/Gloria!

2 'For now a blessed Mother thou shalt be,/all generations laud and honor thee,/thy son shall be Emmanuel, by seers foretold;/most highly favored lady.'/Gloria!

3 Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head,/'To me be as it pleaseth God,' she said,/'My soul shall laud and magnify his holy name':/most highly favored lady./Gloria!

An unlikely messenger called to carry an unlikely message. Cynthia Rigby writes that “Theologians through the centuries have been scandalized when they contemplate that the God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent is incarnate in one person, with that person's particularities and limitations. This ‘scandal of particularity’ is nowhere more evident than in God's selection of Mary. God did not elect to be born of some woman but of a particular

woman; a particular woman gave of her humanity to the being of the God-human.” (*Mary and the Artistry of God*)

Note the interchange, Mary and the angel. There is perplexity, to be sure. There are questions. Even a little fear. But there is no doubt. No doubt that she is called. No doubt that she is fully gifted for the task. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Rigby writes: “Strikingly, Mary does not try to negotiate her way beyond the impossibility of what God is calling her to. Neither does she fold under the weight of it. ‘Nothing will be impossible with God,’ Gabriel tells her. And Mary accepts this.” (“A New Look at Mary,” *Presbyterians Today*, April 2004)

So must we, distinct from, yet never fully separated from, Mary’s call, accept *our* vocation as messenger, as unlikely, unexpected messenger. To trust the God that calls us. And not negotiate because of our humanity.

Rigby writes: “What would our lives look like if we were to live in recognition of our identity as genuine participants in the coming of the Kingdom, bearers of God to a needy world?”

If we need clues as to what bearing God looks like, what that message sounds like, we discover Mary’s own creed. The messenger embodies the message she was called to share. The church and culture have domesticated it somewhat, made it beautiful, even as we have sanitized the radical nature of Christmas itself. But it is all there.

It is called the “Magnificat” because Mary reminds us that her primary calling, like ours, is to “magnify” God, to celebrate God, to make God great. As it comes to us in scripture in the form of music, let’s experience it that way now.

“My Soul Gives Glory to Me God”

2. My God has done great things for me:/Yes, holy is this Name./All people will declare me blessed,/And blessings they shall claim.

3. From age to age to all who fear,/Such mercy love imparts,/Dispensing justice far and near,/Dismissing selfish hearts.

4. Love casts the mighty from their thrones,/Promotes the insecure,/Leaves hungry spirits satisfied;/The rich seem suddenly poor.

What the song called Magnificat does is, first and foremost, magnify God. “Holy is God’s name.” That is the baseline – holiness. Holiness is the starting point. Yet holiness is as holiness does.

Just as there is continual interplay between messenger and message, there is continual interplay between who God is and God's mission in the world.

And what *is* God's holy mission that Mary magnifies? What is the lyric she sings and to what tune? Mary reminds us that God is a table-turning God. Up is down and down is up. Strong is weak and weak is strong. Power is lowliness and lowliness is power. Richness is hunger and hunger is richness. Wealth is poverty and poverty is wealth. That is the mission. That is the song. To remind us who God is and what God does.

It is rigorous and demanding and counter-cultural. It is the mission that Mary's son, grown to be a man, embodied. It is the mission, the song, that got him killed, reminding us always of the interplay between what we celebrate this day and Good Friday and Easter.

It is the mission that challenges power, always, regardless of how the world is turning, regardless of which party is in power, regardless of how religion is faring in terms of popularity and cultural acceptance.

It is a holy mission, holy not so much in that it sets us apart, but holy in that it calls us deeper and deeper into God's world, the world God created and called good and loves so, so much.

It is a get-your-hands dirty mission, a live with discomfort mission. It is easier to sweep it aside, or to put a bow on it, or to compartmentalize it. Yet we know it is right – it is right because it is what God calls us to do, first and foremost, but it is right because we know in our hearts and souls that it is what our broken and fearful world needs. Always. And now.

David Lose reminds us that singing is an act of resistance. ("In the Meantime," December 2015) He's right. It is other things as well. Singing is an act of joy. An act of comfort. The "Magnificat" accomplishes all of these. Maybe that is what hope is – joy, *and* comfort, *and* resistance. But definitely an act of resistance, and protest.

Lose writes: "I think Mary... knew how hard life was under Roman oppression. Yet when faced with the long odds of (her) situation, (she) did not retreat, or apologize, or despair, (she) *sang*. (She) sang of (her) confidence in the Lord's promise to upend the powers that be, reverse the fortunes of an unjust world, and lift up all those who had been oppressed. When your back is to the wall, and all looks grim, one of the most unexpected and powerful things you can do is sing."

Karoline Lewis writes that "There are many ways that we might respond to religious rejection, prejudice, fanaticism, narrowness, and bigotry. There are many principles, many mantras, many Bible verses that would suffice to articulate God's ways when the ways of the world seem to have taken over. But (what if) we sang Mary's song? A song to sing instead of talk of indifference and intolerance? A song to sing instead of speaking words of hate and fear? A song to sing instead of closed mouths, unwilling to speak up for or speak out against? Mary's song

would make our world a different place, a better place, a place where we might even catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God.” (“A Merciful Advent” in *Dear Working Preacher*)

If you are like me, you are receiving an endless stream of year-end news stories, using numbers to summarize things. They are intended to be read quickly, on a screen.

- “Five ways that Star Wars is the movie we need right now.”
- “Four winners and four losers from the new tax bill.”
- “Three reasons why the Bills will make the playoffs” ...followed quickly by “three reasons why they won’t.”

You get the point.

So here, clickbait or not, are three insights from the Magnificat narrative:

1. God calls unexpected, unlikely people – in this case Mary in an extraordinarily unique way, but all of us – to be God’s messengers.
2. The message and the messenger, or the messenger and the message, are inextricably linked. This is called incarnation. This is called Christmas.
3. This is holy work, because God makes it so.

So when the angel appears in your life, or God whispers in your ear, or your soul simply can’t imagine doing anything else, know that you are called, know that you are blessed, and know that God is with you.

That is a song worth singing. Amen.

“My Souls Cries out with a Joyful Shout”

From the halls of power to the fortress tower,/not a stone will be left on stone./Let the king beware for your justice tears/every tyrant from his throne./The hungry poor shall weep no more,/for the food they can never earn;/These are tables spread, ev'ry mouth be fed, for the world is about to turn.

Refrain:

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.

Though the nations rage from age to age,/we remember who holds us fast:/God's mercy must deliver us/from the conqueror's crushing grasp./This saving word that our forbears heard/ is

the promise that holds us bound,/ 'Til the spear and rod be crushed by God,/ who is turning the world around. (Refrain)