

The Third Church Pulpit
Sermons from Third Presbyterian Church
Rochester, New York

“Mary’s Story”

John Wilkinson

December 23, 2018



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Fourth Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:39–58

In her book called *Accidental Saints*, Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz–Weber writes that “There is a reason Mary is everywhere. I've seen her image all over the world, in cafés in Istanbul, on students' backpacks in Scotland, in a market stall in Jakarta, but I don't think her image is everywhere because she is a reminder to be obedient, and I don't think it has to do with social revolution. Images of Mary remind us of God's favor. Mary is what it looks like to believe that we already are who God says we are.”

Mary is everywhere. At a staff lunch we shared our favorite Christmas carols. “Angels we have heard on high” and “In the bleak midwinter” tied for first. The latter includes “but his mother only, in her maiden bliss...” Other carols portray her as “kind” and “mild” and “gentle.” Is that our image? Docile? Compliant? Obedient? Obedient, yes, but for me, at least, hardly passive. Another song popular these days, “Mary did you know?” “I like that song,” a resident of our house said. “But of course she knew.” Good theology there.

Let's look at the story we just shared. Already the angel Gabriel has come to Mary. Mary is perplexed and afraid, of course. But she is fully engaged, not that it takes me to say that to make it true. She asks how; Gabriel explains. She says “yes.” I remember reading sermon after sermon last year connecting Mary's story and the #metoo movement, a conversation that continues to demand attention. At our Advent retreat, we posed the question “what if Mary said no?” It's a great question, because it emphasizes that Mary is an active participant in this story, exercising what is called “agency.” Perhaps you saw a recent *New Yorker* cartoon, a portrayal of the Mary–Gabriel conversation. Mary says: “I'm really excited about this opportunity, but I'm hoping there's room to negotiate the title. What about “rises to the occasion Mary” or ‘cool under pressure Mary?’”

She said “yes,” but it was not a passive, complaint “yes.” It was an active “yes.” After saying “yes,” she goes to see her cousin Elizabeth, to share her news. Elizabeth blesses Mary, and lets her know that she, too, is expecting. Good news all around. And then this, what you all just read. It is called, often, the Magnificat, because of the term “magnifies.” My soul magnifies God, makes God bigger. It is sometimes called Mary’s “song” because it appears in that form in the original language, and has been treated as such by composers across the centuries.

We have spent the last two Advent Sundays considering John the Baptist, his message and our common calling to be prophets and messengers, magnifying – as it were – the inextricable link between faith and politics. I believe that Mary, this young woman finding herself in a most unexpected circumstance, doubles down on John’s vision as she herself – along with all of the other titles we give her – embodies God’s prophetic call profoundly.

Her song itself makes the case. We often stop at the first few lines – Mary magnifies God, I am blessed, she says, and God is holy. But we can’t stop there. Next is where Mary’s song becomes Mary’s manifesto, Mary’s prophetic, revolutionary creed. God is merciful, she says. God scatters the proud. God brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. The hungry are filled, the rich are sent away. This is as prophetic as John ever was, as any prophet ever was, and we take great risk if we gloss over these words because of who said them or when we hear them.

D.L. Mayfield writes that “Mary, in our tradition, was a vehicle for Jesus: a holy womb, a good and compliant and obedient girl. Much later in life,’ Mayfield writes, “I was shocked to discover that Mary wasn’t quiet, nor was she what I would call meek and mild.” In the Magnificat, Mayfield writes, “Mary comes across less like a scared and obedient 15-year-old and more like a rebel intent on reorienting unjust systems.”

Mayfield reminds us that Oscar Romero, priest and martyr, drew a comparison between Mary and the poor and powerless people in his own community, and that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis, called the Magnificat “the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung.”

Mayfield concludes: “Mary, no longer just a silent member of the nativity, or a holy womb for God, or an obedient and compliant girl, has become the focal point for how I, and many other Christians, celebrate Christmas while living in the reality of waiting for true justice to come. She has helped me understand the true magnificence of how much God cares about our political, economic and social realities.” (“Mary’s ‘Magnificat’ in the Bible is revolutionary. Some evangelicals silence her.”)

Theologian Russ Dean follows a similar line of thought. “The Church often ‘spiritualizes’ the text,” Dean says, “– which really means divorcing the otherwise obvious challenge from any practical reality.”

We often hear her words as poetry, or metaphor, or maybe a vision of how things ought to be, or will be. But Dean reminds us that “Mary’s (is a song of) social justice – an actual call to challenge the social structure, the economic narrative, the political reality.” Our tendency has been to “love it, quote it, sing it – but not let it affect our personal comfort or challenge the status quo of church or society.”

Dean says, “Mary’s song can be made into a pleasing little Christmas carol, a sentimental melody set to the way things have always been, the way things will be in the ‘by and by.’ But maybe the song really is a subversive message of social change, a vision for a new world order.” (“Rather than ‘spiritualizing’ Mary’s song, let’s be open to its subversive message”)

Jill Duffield writes that “Women blessed by God tend toward the bold and audacious, the brave and risk taking. When God calls upon them to participate in the salvation of their people, they do not just acquiesce, they take charge...Mary’s soul magnifies the Lord, “Duffield writes, “as she sings about the coming great reversal where God scatters the proud and brings down the mighty.”

The website of the SALT Project writes that “Mary sings a revolutionary song about God’s revolutionary love...and the next step is having the courage to lift our voices and sing: *God’s love is remaking the world!*”

- What would it look like to hear Mary’s song in a new way, in that way?
- What would it look like to sing those words ourselves, to take *her* song and make it our song, to understand the ways that Mary’s story is our story?

- What would it look like for us to take our place in a long line of messengers, of prophets – with names like Isaiah and John the Baptist and John Calvin and Martin Luther King, Jr. or in this place Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass and Mary, yes Mary, especially Mary, not only the mother of Jesus but a prophet and messenger in her own right with a voice and a song?
- What would it look like to re-envision our Christmas, not to stop doing so much what we have done (though a little de-emphasis on the consumerism of it all couldn't hurt us!) but to make Christmas more profound, as we take seriously what Mary takes seriously?
- What would it look like if, when every time we sing her name in a familiar carol, we expand our vision of who she was?

If Mary is concerned about the relationship between the poor and the powerful, the hungry and the wealthy, then can our Christmas journey not lead us anywhere but to that very same place? This is not so much about tactics but vision, yet can we imagine what this would look like in terms of those who hunger and are without homes in our city, for those impacted by racism and sexism and poverty and every form of injustice. This is about recalibrating our Christmas vision based on Mary's prophetic witness and her radical faithfulness.

Mary said "yes." It feels like a fierce yes to me. Our invitation will be different, and our story unique. But our "yes" is needed now, just as hers was needed then. How might our words this Christmas, and the story of our lives, magnify God, God's concern for the hungry and poor, God's revolutionary love?

Mary's story is our story. Mary's song is our song, a song of hope and joy, of love and peace. May God's name be praised by the story of our lives, and may the world – and each of us, and those you love – experience a blessed Christmas. Amen.

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