

Natalie W. Bell
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Fourth Advent

Mary's Song
Luke 1:39-56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be^[e] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Mary's Song of Praise

⁴⁶ *And Mary^[e] said,*

*"My **soul magnifies** the Lord,*

⁴⁷ *and my **spirit rejoices** in God my Savior,*

⁴⁸ *for he has **looked with favor** on the lowly state of his servant.*

*Surely from now on all generations **will call me blessed,***

⁴⁹ *for the Mighty One **has done great things for me,***

and holy is his name;

⁵⁰ *indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him*

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ *He has **shown strength** with his arm;*

*he has **scattered the proud** in the imagination of their hearts.*

⁵² *He has **brought down the powerful** from their thrones*

*and **lifted up the lowly;***

⁵³ *he has **filled the hungry** with good things*

*and **sent the rich away empty.***

⁵⁴ *He has **come to the aid** of his child Israel,*

in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ *according to the promise he made to our ancestors,*

to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

⁵⁶ *And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.*

Professor Rolf Jacobson of Luther Seminary says that Mary's song,
Known as the *Magnificat*, for the words *my soul 'magnifies'*
Is actually a **radical protest song**.

It's the kind of song that the enslaved Israelites might have sung in Egypt.
[or exiled Judeans in Babylon].

The kind of song that has been sung by countless people of faith through the ages
in resistance, in defiance of empires, slavers, terrorists, invaders, and the like.

Mary's Psalm sounded the initial, clear, trumpet call

that .. ***Christ's advent was to be***

a world-transforming, ***universe-shaking event***"

Workingpreacher.org, Dec 21, 2014.

I agree. I don't often protest with placards, but I do preach—

And sometimes that's a little like protesting the status quo.

Because the Gospel IS a protest—against the ways of our world.

The truth is the Bible, the Gospel Jesus proclaimed,

and Mary's song—are all POLITICAL.

NOT partisan.

There's a big difference.

The Gospel is NOT Democrat or Republican, left or right.

Instead, it has ***political ramifications and application in our lives.***

It ***INFORMS*** what we do—our actions, politics and decisions.

It's political because it is the opposite of society's status quo.

Mary's song is a song of protest,

just like it's a song of ***hope, joy, and love. It's love in action.***

Even governments realize this is a protest song.

In the 1980's, singing this song or reciting it in public,

was not allowed in Guatemala.

Why?

Because it's dangerous----all this talk about humbling the powerful
and lifting up the lowly and poor!

It's dangerous because it's all about ***a young WOMAN lifting people up
in a patriarchal culture.***

And hers is a story that involves ***her, a young woman***—and the Holy Spirit—

NO MAN is involved in the birth of Jesus!

Think about how radical that is!

Preston Sharpe, the Art of Preaching , Year A, Advent 3, Mark Alan Powell, "Was Mary's Magnificat Banned
in Guatemala?" Supplement to *Introducing the New Testament*, 2nd edition., 2018.

German Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who worked to overthrow Hitler, wrote this about her song:

*Something **will happen** to each of us who decides to come to Christ's manger.
Each of us will have been **judged or redeemed** before we go away.
Each of us will either **break down or come to know** that God's mercy is turned
toward us.... For those who are great and powerful in this world,
there are two places where **their courage fails them**,
which terrify them to the very depths of their souls....
These are **the manger and the cross of Jesus Christ**.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "My Spirit Rejoices," London, Third Sunday in Advent, December 17, 1933, *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Edited by Isabel Best, (Fortress: Minneapolis, 2012), 115-122.

Rev. Preston Sharpe cites a bumper sticker that reads:

Well Behaved Women Rarely Make History.

How true.

Mary is not a typical young woman of Nazareth.

She is ***brave, courageous, and stepping out in faith***

to believe in the kingdom of God that her son Jesus will bring into the world!

Mary is STRONG, and tough.

We often see her depicted in a flowing blue robe, looking ***QUIET and serene***.

But think about what she went through, as a young unmarried pregnant woman---

Think of the public ridicule and scorn,

And maybe even more so if she told them what baby she was carrying!

And by whom!

It was only her ***Aunt Elizabeth who really welcomed and believed her!***

And Elizabeth praised her for believing the angel

who proclaimed Jesus' birth!

So what is her song all about?

It's about Mary being ***part of a larger story***,

The story of the people of God,

In a world turned upside down by the good news!

The rich and powerful being brought ***low***,

The lowly, poor, unknown, and simple being ***exalted***—just like Mary.

When Gabriel announces the birth to Mary,

He bows down to HER!

She goes from ***Nobody to Somebody*** in an instant!

Chosen by God!

If Mary sang this today—it would be a song about

All the famous celebrities,

The powerful politicians,

The billionaires and millionaires

All being brought low and sent away empty.

And the poor, the immigrants, the marginalized and the oppressed

Being filled with good things and lifted up!

Now just ponder that for a moment.

It's not at all what our world values.

But it is, the values of the kingdom of God!

This is the kind of song that can get you in a lot of trouble,

Even killed, for treason...

Just like Jesus.

Does this mean that the rich and powerful are automatically cursed,

And the poor and lowly saved?

No.

It does mean that ***God exalts the lowly***, people like Mary.

And in the ***kingdom of God, money, power, and influence don't matter***—

what matters is the ***love*** we share, the ***help*** we offer,

the ***service*** we do in the name of Jesus.

Mary is SINGING this song.

And we know that singing can be an act of ***joy, celebration, and connection***.

It can also be an act of ***lament***.

Like a beloved song at a funeral,

to remind you of your loved one.

Singing can also be an ***act of resistance***.

The civil rights movement had many powerful songs,

with themes of hope in the midst of despair.

Light in the midst of darkness.

When African-Americans sang, they were praising God,

AND protesting those who locked them out of equality and society,

but couldn't keep them away from God's promises!

Civil rights leaders knew that singing songs like “We Shall Overcome,”

Was a powerful act of resistance, and hope.

Singing helped to bring down the Berlin Wall!

For several months preceding the fall of that wall,
citizens in East Germany,
gathered on Monday evenings by candlelight around St. Nikolai church –to sing.
And over two months, their numbers grew to more than
three hundred thousand people--
over half the citizens of the city!
All singing songs of hope and protest and justice,
carrying candles, and chanting ‘no violence’.
Until their songs actually shook the powers that be, and changed the world.
The wall came down.
The authorities didn’t crack down on them like other protests,
because it was so unexpected!
Later, when someone asked one of the officers of the East German secret police,
why they did not crush this protest,
the officer replied, ***“We had no contingency plan for song.”!***
<https://www.davidlose.net/2015/12/advent-4-c-singing-as-an-act-of-resistance/>

I think Mary AND Elizabeth

Probably understood their words as those of protest.
I mean, they knew how ***ridiculous their situations were –***
Two women, one too old to bear a child,
The other young and unmarried, but bearing the Savior of the World!

They knew how little they mattered,
As ***women*** from the ***rural hill country of Judea***,
far away from power and influence.
Living under Roman occupation.

Yet when faced with the challenges of their situations,
they did not retreat, or apologize,
they did not despair---they held out hope,
and they sang!

Mary sang about confidence in ***God’s promise to turn the world upside down.***
To ***lift up the oppressed***, and bring down the proud.
To ***fill the hungry***, and send the rich away empty.
To ***help the lowly***, even women, even them.

Because sometimes the most powerful thing you can do is SING.

Mary's Magnificat is one of ***four songs in the Bible, sung ONLY by women***, at key moments in the history of God's people.

Miriam sings after the Exodus from Egypt.

Deborah sings at the founding of the nation.

Hannah sings during a time of oppression.

And Mary sings about the coming Savior.

All these songs are about God's liberating power.

And ***God doing a NEW thing.***

And they all speak about ***US-- being partners in God's plan*** for the world.

But, how often do YOU think about partnering with God?

And did you notice the verbs in Mary's Magnificat?

God's action—is in PAST tense!

All these are things God ***has already done*** to bring about liberation, even though it is ***not FULLY realized.***

*the Mighty One HAS done great things for me,
and holy is his name;*

⁵⁰ *indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him....*

⁵¹ *He HAS shown strength with his arm;
he HAS scattered the proud*

⁵² *He HAS brought down the powerful ...
and lifted up the lowly;*

⁵³ *he has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.*

I wonder, how WE COULD LIVE INTO this song, today?

Mary is inviting us to join in the kingdom of God!

How will we join it?

How will we protest and stand up for the Gospel, in a world that ignores it?

Will we lift up the lowly?

Fill the hungry?

Help the oppressed?

This is a precursor to Matthew 25---

where Jesus says whatever you have done for the ***least of these, you did for me.***

That's the Savior born in Bethlehem.

That's the Gospel!

The kingdom of God is NOT about power, influence, or money.

It's not about getting our own way, being right, being known or recognized.

It's about helping and serving those who have

no power, or influence, who are not known or recognized.

It's about lifting up the lowly.

That's who Mary was,

That's who Jesus was, a baby born in a manger—

far away from home, and without the comforts of anything we consider necessary for a happy birth.

***How will we live into the kingdom that Mary proclaims,
And Jesus ushered in?***

How will we help and serve?

How will we offer forgiveness and grace?

How will we share hope? Peace? Justice?

You may know the story of Scarlet Lewis,
who lost her 7-year old son Jesse, 13 years ago December 14th,
at the Sandy Hook shooting in Newtown, Connecticut.
Where 20 children were killed with six adults.

When Scarlet went home,
she noticed that Jesse had written ***three words on a chalkboard*** in their kitchen.
“Nurturing. Healing (misspelled as “Heling”). Love.”

Lewis said that she felt strangely tied to Adam Lanza (the shooter).

...she reflected on her son's words, she says,

***“If Adam Lanza could have received nurturing, healing and love, this tragedy
never would have happened.”***

She learned about the bullying he experienced,
the ways he had been rejected.

And over time, it opened her heart to forgive him.

Today December 14, 2017, <https://www.today.com/popculture/celebrities-share-heartfelt-messages-sandy-hook-shooting-anniversary-t120062>.

In what ways are WE being asked to forgive and share grace?

The Brown University shooting has been shocking and heartbreaking.
Because like other places in our country where these things happen every day—
there were ***2 students who survived this shooting,***

who had already survived a mass shooting in high school!

One of them, Mia Tretta, was shot at age 15,
and lost her best friend beside her—in 2019 in Santa Clarita, CA.
Now she relives the whole experience all over again.

The mayor of Providence spoke of visiting a victim in the hospital
and hearing him say that the active shooter drills he grew up with
actually helped him survive.

We are raising a generation,
who not only do active such drills from Pre-K on,
but who are also ***surviving not just one, but sometimes two shootings.***

And what are we doing?

Our government shut down the office of Gun Violence Prevention,
and opened a new office to protect the 2nd Amendment.
Truly insane, in the only country where kids are lost daily to such violence.
<https://www.everytown.org/trump-administration-guns-federal-action/>

How are WE working for PEACE? And JUSTICE?

How will WE LIVE INTO the kingdom of God this Christmas?

Into Jesus' new way of life?

How can we show some of Mary's COURAGE,
And stand up for the values of the Gospel, today?

One of our Christmas hymns is a song of hope and protest:

*Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.
Born thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever, now thy gracious kingdom bring.*

Friends, hear the Good News

We are called to live into the kingdom of God,
At Christmas, and all year long.
And all God's people said together, Amen.