“Mary’s Song: The Magnificat”

Sarah Wolf

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Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:39-55

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But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,

who are one of the little clans of Judah,

from you shall come forth for me

one who is to rule in Israel,

whose origin is from of old,

from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time

when she who is in labour has brought forth;

then the rest of his kindred shall return

to the people of Israel.

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,

in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great

to the ends of the earth;

and he shall be the one of peace.

Our gospel lesson this morning comes from Luke 1:39-55. In today’s text, the angel Gabriel has just appeared to Mary and announced that she has found favor with God and that she will conceive and bear a son who will be named Jesus. Mary responded to Gabriel with the question, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel replied by telling Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child born will be holy; he will be the Son of God.” Then, Gabriel tells Mary that her cousin, Elizabeth, who is beyond child-bearing years, is also pregnant. For nothing will be impossible with God.

Today’s reading begins immediately after the angel departs from Mary.

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

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

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

for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

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Mary, the mother of Jesus, has long been a subject of fascination for many. There have been countless paintings of her throughout the centuries and poems and legends written about her. Myths about her childhood, her adulthood, and whether or not she had any other children besides Jesus are found in abundance. There is even a tradition that says that because Jesus was fully divine, Mary felt no pain during childbirth. One ancient text reports, “It came about, when Mary and Joseph were alone, that Mary then looked with her eyes and saw a small infant and was astonished.”[[1]](#footnote-2) Jesus just appeared. And Mary felt nothing.

If you do a Google image search of, “Mary, mother of Jesus,” you will find the same depictions of Mary over and over and over.

She is most often pale in complexion, wearing some shade of blue, and has a golden halo surrounding her head. She often is either looking down (presumably at the baby Jesus), or looking up toward the heavens as if she is in prayer. She almost always looks to be older than the young teen that she most likely was when she gave birth to Jesus.

The Mary that we often picture when we think of the mother of Jesus has been sanitized and separated from the realities of her situation.

In the book, “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever,” Mary is given new life. The story is told by Beth whose mother is directing the church’s Christmas pageant. Choosing who will play Mary in the Christmas pageant was one of the most important parts. The previous director would tell the children that Mary “should be a cheerful, happy little girl who is unselfish and kind to others.” Everyone assumes that Alice Wendleken will be Mary because she is “so smart, so neat and clean, and, most of all, so holy-looking.” But instead of Alice playing Mary, Imogene Herdman bullies her way into the part. Imogene and her siblings had never heard the Christmas story before. Beth’s mother begins to tell the Herdmans the story of Jesus’s birth and so the readers are treated to viewing the Christmas story through the eyes of a girl who has known only hardship and the realities of poverty during her short time on earth.

Beth reports, When Imogene heard the bit about there being no room in the inn, her jaw dropped and she sat straight up in her seat.

“My God!” she said. “Not even for Jesus?”

“Well, now, after all,” Mother explained, “nobody knew the baby was going to turn out to be Jesus.”

“You said Mary knew,” Ralph Herdman said. “Why didn’t she tell them?”

“I would have told them!” Imogene put in. “Boy, would I have told them! What was the matter with Joseph that he didn’t tell them? Her pregnant and everything,” she grumbled.

And so the other children in the pageant, the ones who had grown up hearing this story read time and time again began to hear the ancient story with new ears and to see it acted out with new eyes.

You see, Imogene didn’t know that Mary was supposed to be acted out in one certain way — sort of quiet and dreamy and out of this world. The way Imogene did it, Mary was a lot like Mrs. Santoro at the Pizza Parlor. Mrs. Santoro is a big fat lady with a little skinny husband and nine children and she yells and hollers and hugs her kids. That’s how Imogene’s Mary was — loud and bossy.

On the night of the pageant, the entire town turns up to see what the Herdmans do to the play.

When it was time for Mary and Joseph to make their entrance, Ralph and Imogene Herdman were there, standing in the doorway, looking as if they weren’t sure they were in the right place. Beth the narrator tells us, “They looked like the people you see on the six o’clock news—refugees, sent to wait in some strange ugly place, with their boxes and sacks around them.”

She continues, “It suddenly occurred to me that this was just the way it must have been for the real Holy Family, stuck away in a barn by people who didn’t much care what happened to them. They couldn’t have been very neat and tidy either, but more like this Mary and Joseph (Imogene’s veil was cockeyed as usual, and Ralph’s hair stuck out all around his ears). Imogene had the baby doll but she wasn’t carrying it the way she was supposed to, cradled in her arms. She had it slung up over her shoulder, and before she put it in the manger, she thumped it twice on the back.”

After the play is over, Beth reflects on Imogene’s portrayal of Mary. She says, “As far as I’m concerned, Mary is always going to look a lot like Imogene Herdman — sort of nervous and bewildered, but ready to clobber anyone who laid a hand on her baby.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Perhaps it is time that we re-examined our treatment of Mary over the years.

Today’s text offers us a glimpse into the mother of Jesus that expands our view of Mary beyond that of a “cheerful, happy girl” who is “unselfish and kind to others.”

In today’s text, Mary is so much more than that. She is a prophet and prophetic voice and action are sprinkled throughout the text which all point to Mary’s unique vision of what God was doing for all of humanity through her.

The first prophetic moment occurs when Elizabeth first hears Mary’s greeting as she’s coming up the road. When Elizabeth hears Mary’s voice, the baby in her womb leaps with joy. One commentary writer notes, “the child leaping in her womb is taken as a prophetic sign of recognition of Mary and her child. The future role of John as proclaimer of a ‘more powerful one than himself’ is here anticipated.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

The next prophetic moments occur when Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and she interprets the meaning behind the baby’s movement. She tells Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb … And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” In her interpretation, Elizabeth pronounces Mary to be blessed for two reasons. First, that she would be chosen by God to be the mother of the Messiah and secondly, she is blessed because she believed.

Elizabeth is overwhelmed by all that is happening in her life. First, a child for her and Zechariah, even though they were far beyond child-bearing years. And now, her young cousin, Mary, is carrying the Messiah. And so she responds by proclaiming Mary to be blessed.

But Mary responds by turning and directing all of the blessings to God. Unlike Zechariah, who is tongue-tied when Gabriel tells him about Elizabeth’s pregnancy, Mary responds to the realization of what God is doing with song.

Mary’s song, known by its Latin name, “The Magnificat,” is a stunning piece of prophecy coming from an unlikely place — a young pregnant female, engaged to be married, who closely identifies herself with the poor and the lowly.

Her song can be divided into two segments. The first half marvels at all that God is doing for her, a lowly servant of the Lord. At all times, she redirects any praise that could be directed her way —for being good, sweet, or kind (you know, the typical ways that we picture Mary) — she redirects any of that praise back to God. If she is blessed to carry the Christ-child, it is only because God has looked with favor on her.

The second half of her song moves from what God has done for Mary to what God has done for society as a whole. Mary makes the connection that if God can choose to work through her, a relative nobody, then God can and will choose to intervene for the rest of the poor and for those at the bottom of the societal ladder and not merely through Mary.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Mary aligns herself with the poor and the lowly of society. She marvels not only at God’s power and might, but also God’s mercy. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has overturned society in favor of the oppressed. God has remembered God’s covenant with Abraham and is working to save God’s people. God is not only great, God is good.

But this baby that Mary carries in her womb might not be good news for everyone. Those who have kept their wallets clutched close to their chests, will soon find themselves begging on the streets. Those who find themselves in powerful positions might soon find themselves mired in the muck of poverty and powerlessness.

The Mary who sings the Magnificat loudly proclaims the subversive incarnation of the Messiah, though we are often tempted to keep meek and mild Mary tucked away from anything that doesn’t feel safe, that might make us feel uncomfortable. Perhaps this is because we might find ourselves identifying more with the people in power in Mary’s song than with those on the margins, and we are afraid of what that might mean for us.

We can be so quick to want to ignore anything that makes us squirm with discomfort.

Covenant’s Novels and Needles book club recently read a novel titled, “Dear Mrs. Bird” The book centers around a girl in her twenties living in London during World War II. While she longs to be war reporter, she ends up being a typist for an advice column in a women’s magazine. Part of her job is to sift through the letters from readers seeking advice and to throw out any letters that have what Mrs. Bird refers to as “unpleasantness.”

For a while, Emmaline tries to follow Mrs. Bird’s long list of topics she has deemed as unpleasant, but then she starts to see how many young women are truly without anyone to turn to for advice. She takes matters into her own hands and begins to answer some of the letters herself. In answering the letters, she realizes that life is full of “unpleasantness,” whether we care to admit it or not, and ignoring it doesn’t make it go away. But by addressing that which makes us uncomfortable head on, we might be able to better see people for who they are and figure out where we fit in alongside them.

We are too often like Mrs. Bird, willing to sacrifice the full meaning of the story in order to preserve the way we think things ought to be. When we only speak of Mary as the quiet, dutiful mother, we lose Mary’s prophetic voice. We need to see Mary as a whole, dynamic person. We need to see her in the times when she is quiet and pondering all of these things in her heart as well as the times when she can’t be silent because the Lord is doing a new and wonderful thing.

Our final hymn today is a paraphrase of the Magnificat known as the Canticle of the Turning. When we sing it together, we join Mary in singing of God’s saving grace through Jesus Christ. We join Mary in looking forward to when those on the margins of society are lifted up and those who abuse power and privilege are leveled. We join Mary in proclaiming, “Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.” We join Mary in proclaiming, “This is the way things ought to be and this is the way God is making that happen.”

Whether that makes us comfortable or not.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. Lauren Winner, Wearing God; Page 161 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Barbara Robinson, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Robert Tannehill. Luke [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Tannehill [↑](#footnote-ref-5)