

“Mary Sings On”

Psalm 72:1–7, 18, 19
Luke 1:39–56

I was going through a set of pictures. One photo in particular, captured my attention. A group of women holding in their arms infants and children, several rows of these women -- sitting on benches -- some standing, beneath a canopy, looking into the camera, cradling their children.

There weren't many smiles in that particular photo-op. The picture was taken in Kumba, Cameroon, West Africa, at an AIDS clinic. The mothers are poor, most of them gravely ill; their babies are also ill. They live in a land where an astonishing percentage of adults suffer from HIV/AIDS. Now the children carry the virus. It's a heartbreaking picture of mothers, lovingly cradling their infants and children.

For me, every poor mother and baby— all around the world ... and even here in America—is a reminder of the Madonna and child. I can't help but think of that young mother, Mary, and her infant son, in a stable long ago.

Madonna and child ... That's probably the most painted scene in the history of art. It is etched so deeply in our hearts. It is so human, so intimate, so accurate that in spite of all the sentimental and commercial and romantic images of the season we still recognize in Mary and her newborn child something incredibly important about God's way with us. And with the whole human family.

The Gospel according to Luke introduces Christmas with a series of 3 very human stories. **The first story** is about an elderly, childless couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. When a messenger from God comes to tell Zechariah that his wife will have a baby, old Zechariah can't and won't believe it, and he is struck dumb until his son, John, is born. So Zechariah is given a full nine months of his own in which to think things over, before he finds his voice.

The second story is about a young relative of Elizabeth. Meet Mary of Nazareth. The messenger of God comes to her as well to announce that she, though not married, will have a baby. Her son will be the Son of the Most High, God's own child. Mary is confused and afraid. She's very young, and engaged to Joseph. It's a dilemma. The neighbors will gossip. And what will she tell her parents and her fiancé?

So she visits Elizabeth, an older relative, her aunt perhaps, now six months along in her own unlikely and unexpected pregnancy.

Elizabeth, bless her heart, opens her home and her arms and her heart.

She thinks Mary's embarrassing, awkward, and morally questionable condition is just wonderful and says so.

"Blessed are you among women, Mary,"

Elizabeth says that to a frightened, ostracized adolescent.

Every teenager needs an aunt like that.

The third story Luke tells to introduce Christmas is the story of Mary's response to all of this. Certainly after the emotional power of that moment when Mary is told by the angel—the moment she understands the mysterious and frightening thing that is happening to her—and after the amazing grace of Elizabeth's acceptance and affirmation and blessing, after all that it is time for Mary to say something.

When Mary finds her voice, it is quite a speech. Johann Sebastian Bach put it to some of the most glorious music ever written, and called it *The Magnificat*:

My soul magnifies the Lord . . .
for he has looked with favor on the
lowliness of his servant. . . .
The Mighty One has done
great things for me.

And then there follows a list of great things that God has done, strong things, a list that doesn't make it into many Christmas greetings:

God has—
scattered the proud,
brought down the powerful from their thrones,

filled the hungry,
sent the rich away empty.

That's quite a speech. Hallmark has never come up with a way to use it in a Christmas card. Preachers get in trouble for saying things like that. It sounds an awful lot like politics and economics, sounds like someone is going to upset the prevailing political structure and redistribute the wealth, and turn the world upside down.

Mary breaks into song. But it is not a lullaby she sings. . . .

This very young pregnant girl looks out across the Judean hills bathed in winter twilight...

She believes she hears kingdoms fall
and the earth rock beneath her feet.

She feels the child within her move
and she hums a strong tune of
liberation.

Mary can't help but wonder why she was chosen, a peasant girl, poor, young, vulnerable, weak. If God was choosing someone to give birth to God's own son, you would think God would have chosen a mature, strong woman who lives in a royal palace.

Unless, of course, the choice of Mary—young, poor, vulnerable—represents something important about God, unless who Mary is—young, poor, vulnerable—redefines how God comes into the world and works in the world in unexpected ways, through the lives of humble, unlikely people.

God, this young woman is saying, cares deeply and passionately about people and how they live, the conditions of their lives in the world.

God cares a lot about those who are shut out and marginalized,

God cares a lot about people who, in this world of plenty, are hungry.

God cares a lot about injustice and suffering and inequality.

God cares a lot about those who stream across borders for safety/for home etc.

God cares a lot about those who march with arms outstretched ... and chant

with frustration and hope, refrains, like
Black Lives Matter.

The Magnificat is designed to make us—we who celebrate the birth of God's son so passionately—to make us uncomfortable with the reality of poverty and homelessness, the reality that millions of our own children go to bed hungry every night,
the reality that millions of American families live without adequate housing and nourishing food and health care.

As we welcome the Christ child, we best be made uncomfortable about the way the current economy intensifies and increases the gap between the rich and the poor—uncomfortable in light of Jesus' mother's confidence that God will fill the poor and send the rich away empty.

It is a mistake, I think, either to glamorize the poor or demonize the rich. Jesus himself didn't do it.

It was Jesus not Karl Marx who said, "How hard it will be for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of heaven." But Jesus also had wealthy friends—Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Jesus was no single-issue social reformer. He did take the side of the underdog, and he did reach out to and include the excluded, and he did seem to go out of his way to be with the poor and outcast.

But what Jesus wanted and wants from every man and woman is a personal reawakening ... a revolution, a reordering of our values and commitments.

I believe what God has in mind is a personal revolution in your life and mine, regardless of how much money we have or don't have,

a solemn liberation movement, which each and every one of us could use.

In the Bible the poor know they are poor.

In the Bible the poor know how dependent they are on others, how vulnerable they are, only they seem more aware of it than others.

In the Bible the poor seem to understand that the only things of real value in this life are the gifts— not what we earn or have become, **but what we are given:** the world, beauty, friendship, people to love.

The trouble with the strong and mighty in the Bible is that they don't need anything—or think they don't. Haven't you ever notice that when life is good our prayers for the kingdom get a little faint.

We whisper our prayers “thy kingdom come” so that God can't quite hear them.

‘Thy kingdom come,’ we pray, and hope it won't, for it might upset everything.

When our own kingdom has had a good year we aren't necessarily looking for God's kingdom next year.

Mary's Magnificat is particularly relevant for those of us who are not poor,

Mary's Magnificat is particularly relevant for those of us who live and move and have our being in an American culture hell-bent on consuming. Where we have seldom experienced anything but abundance,

Mary's Magnificat is particularly relevant for it reminds us over and over that our chief purpose in life is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever as the old Catechism said, rather than to be so focused on earning, and spending, and accumulating.

To counting our many blessings ... making sure we hold them securely until we die.

Thinking about Mary's Magnificat, I wonder, “How do I answer when the mystery of God's love breaks through my defensiveness and doubt? . . . Have I been so rich, so stuffed full of myself, my plans and my possessions that I have in fact denied Christ a rightful place on earth? **An honest, respected place in my life.**

The Magnificat teaches a simple truth: We cannot receive a gift unless we have a place for it.

We cannot learn anything if we think we know it all.

We can't enjoy beauty unless there is a place within us that yearns for beauty.

We can't receive love unless we know there is a place deep within us that is empty and needs God's love to fill it.

We can't be lifted up unless we recognize ourselves as being poor.

In the meantime those of us who are making our way slowly but surely to Bethlehem are commissioned to remember how passionately God cares about God's creation, and particularly those who are weak and vulnerable—like those mothers waiting patiently, holding their little ones in their arms, at an AIDS clinic in Kumba, Cameroon.

I think that's something of what Mary had in mind. "My soul magnifies the Lord; for the Mighty One has done great things. He has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful. He has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things."

As Mary sings on, let her teach us this year to celebrate the birth of her son by loosening our grip a bit.

Let Mary upset our self-serving values,

As Mary sings on, let her scatter the mightiness in our life and lift us up in you our own need, our vulnerability, our dependence on others.

As Mary sings on, let her start a quiet revolution in us.

Let her set us free from the obsession that oppresses most of us—to work harder and harder in order to get ahead in order to earn more in order to consume more.

As Mary sings on, let her lead us beyond our identity as an economic entity, a potential consumer, away from a Christmas defined by how many gifts we have received or purchased,

As Mary sings on, let her lead us to a Christmas elegantly simple, defined not at all in economic terms but in terms of love—

the love we are privileged to give, the precious gift of the love of others that comes to us.

As Mary sings on, let her lead us in a different direction altogether—toward a little town,

a stable behind a crowded inn, a cow stall,
a manger where we will find the light of the world ...
love unconditional,
the gift of our salvation. Amen.