

The Song of Mary

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[0 : 00] This year we have heard all about slogans. Good ones and bad ones and offensive ones and not so offensive but ineffective ones.

Black lives matter. Well, what about white lives? Don't all lives matter? That phrase, it's so divisive. You should find a different slogan. Defund the police.

Well, yeah, well, people might not know what that means. And when you say things like defund the police, well, people aren't gonna take you seriously. And you just need to tone it down a little. Why don't you?

Feminists. Well, geez, you don't want to be associated with those bra-burning hippies, do you? Just a couple of months ago, seriously, a couple of months ago I heard about a church staff person who wrote on the evils of feminism and feminists and how they wanted to subjugate men because women are far better than men, which is not what feminism is at all, but whatever.

There is an artist, a guy by the name of Ben Wildflower, and he put this image that you'll see on your screen on his family's Christmas postcard. And he received some angry feedback about it, wondering why he would put these socialist phrases on his Christmas card.

[1 : 18] And the words, of course, are from a song called the Magnificat. It's Mary's song. Mary, the mother of Jesus, who our Greek Orthodox brothers and sisters call Theotokos, the mother of God.

It's her song from Luke chapter one. So some reminders about Mary. Mary, at the time that she gave birth to Jesus, she was young. She was betrothed, which meant that Joseph, the man that she was going to marry, had paid the bride price to Mary's parents, to Mary's father, because women were seen as property at that time to be traded.

And Joseph had paid that price, and then there was going to be a nine to 12 month waiting period between betrothal, the promise to be married, and the payment of that price, and marriage, the consummation of the marriage, sex.

And this is where Mary is, young and betrothed, and she finds out pregnant. Now to be young and betrothed and pregnant was not a great thing to be in the first century, and you know, maybe even now, where people will look down on you.

If you're a woman, you're already seen as property, you're young, you don't have a lot of rights to your own, and you have broken the promise of your betrothal, because Joseph is not the father, and Mary is claiming that no one is the father, or more likely, more appropriately, that the Holy Spirit, that God, has caused her to conceive.

[2 : 52] Now Joseph has every right to have Mary be stripped of her clothing, taken out to the city gates, and made fun of, mocked, ridiculed, ashamed, in front of all of the city.

And Joseph very well might have done that. We're told in the book of Matthew that Joseph was a very righteous man, except an angel literally has to tell Joseph, no, don't do that to the woman that you are betrothed to.

So Mary hears this news, and she goes and spends some time with her relative, Elizabeth, who is old, and has spent most of her life barren, and is pregnant.

Now Elizabeth's husband, Zachariah, he's a priest, and he did not believe the angel that told him that his wife would be pregnant, and so Zachariah, for the rest of the chapter of Luke, is quiet.

The man is silent, but Mary speaks up. And this is what she says. Luke chapter 1, starting in verse 46, Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord.

[3 : 57] Some translations say magnify, which is the Latin magnificat, where the title of the song comes from. And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on, all generations will call me blessed, for the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him.

From generation to generation, he has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things, but he has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. God. Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez argues that any reading of Mary's song of the magnificat is fruitless.

[5 : 02] If it attempts to tone down what Mary's songs tells us about the preferential love of God for the lowly and the abused, about the transformation of history that God's love implies.

Of course, there have been many attempts to tone down Mary and her song. It has been said that three separate nations ruled by autocratic leaders have banned the magnificat from being said in the churches or in the streets, lest the poor masses get any unruly ideas into their heads.

Elizabeth Johnson writes, One of the strongest and most unusual lessons in the light of traditional Maryology, the study of Mary, is the right to say no.

Men who toil in the service of male power and male interest represent Mary only as the woman who knew how to say yes. And indeed, at the Annunciation, the angel Gabrielle telling Mary about the son that she is about to have at the Annunciation, Mary uttered her yes to the call of God's Spirit, a consent to adventure that has been used to promote the passive submission of women.

But, Elizabeth Johnson continues, Here, Mary takes on her own the divine no to what crushes the lowly. She stands up fearlessly and sings out that it will be overturned.

[6 : 31] There is no passivity here, but solidarity with divine outrage over the degradation of life, and with the divine promise to repair the world.

In the process, she bursts out of the boundaries of male-defined femininity, while still every inch a woman. Singing of her joy in God and God's victory over oppression, She becomes not a subjugated, but a prophetic woman.

This Advent season, this countdown to Christmas, we've been in a series called Christmas with the Prophets, in which we've been exploring Joel and Daniel and Isaiah.

And now we count Mary with the Prophets. Mary is not just a silent bystander in the story of Jesus, the story of Israel, the story of the redemption of the world.

Mary has a voice of her own, and Mary speaks for God when she says, He has performed mighty deeds with His arms, scattered the proud, brought down rulers, lifted up the humble, filled the hungry, and has sent the rich away.

[7 : 36] So today's message is pretty simple and short. Three things to listen for, watch for, and to join. Number one, we need to listen to who's talking.

Number two, we need to watch and look at who's being thrown down. Number three, we need to join who is being lifted up. So number one, listen to who's talking.

Who is talking in the story, in the Magnificat? It is a brown, poor, pregnant woman. And for far too often, society and Christians and the church, we have played our own role in this.

We have marginalized, we have set aside, we have refused to listen to those who are not white, those who are not rich, those who are not men.

So we subjugate, we refuse to listen, we put down, we elevate the voices of people who look like me, and refuse to listen to those who maybe, maybe we have ignored for too long.

[8 : 47] We assume that wealth and whiteness and privilege and power and maleness are all signs of God's favor. But the voices that we see in scripture, the voice right here of Theotokos, the mother of God, of Mary, she doesn't look like me, she doesn't sound like me, she's not white.

She's not a man, she's not American. We too need to up our game in shutting up and listening to those who are black and brown and indigenous and biracial.

We need to not only listen to the men in the room, but the men, like Zechariah in verses before, need to close their mouths so that the women can be heard.

Because it's the women, it's the woman in this story who is bearing God, who is bearing salvation, bringing it into the world.

And similarly, at the end of the gospels, it is the women who are proclaiming the resurrection, proclaiming the good news about Jesus. Women brought Jesus into the world.

[10:03] Women proclaimed Jesus out of the tomb. We need to listen to the women. We need to listen to those who are not white. We need to privilege the voices of those who have been marginalized and degraded and set aside.

And in America, that is our black brothers and sisters, our brown brothers and sisters and friends, our indigenous brothers and sisters and friends. It is not just the abled-bodied, but also the disabled.

It is not just the white voices, but also the black and brown voices. It is not just the male voices. It is the female voices. It is not just the straight, but also the gay. Not just the cis, but also the trans. It is all of those that we have played a part in sending away. They are the voices that we need to listen to. So we listen to who's talking in the story.

Number two, we look at who's being thrown down. It is the rich. It is the powerful. It is the prideful. God has scattered those who are proud in their own most thoughts. One translation puts it this way, that their own schemes of power have turned against them.

[11:10] God is bringing down rulers from their thrones, but lifting up the humble. God has filled the hungry with good things, but he has sent the rich away empty. In the biblical economy, your wealth is not necessarily a sign of God's pleasure and God's privilege, God's blessing.

It can be a barrier to being part of what God is up to. Your power is not necessarily a sign that God is on your side. It can be a sign that your power is about to disappear because God is up to something new. Your pride is not a sign that you've got it figured out, all out, and nobody else does. Your pride is a sign that the fall is about to come. And so when we look at who, Mary, prophesying, proclaiming, singing, declaring who is being brought down by God, it's the very things that we often cling to and want and covet for ourselves, the wealth and the power and the privilege to which Mary declares, mm-mm, mm-mm, this is all going to fall down on your own heads.

So we look and we listen to who's talking. We look at who's being thrown down. And then we join who's being lifted up.

It's the humble. It's the hungry. It's the poor. It's the servant. It's those who have been subjugated. The people where we look down on, the people who we look at and say, oh, shouldn't we pity them?

[12:38] The people who we think that God must not be on the side, the people who are suffering, the people who are marginalized, the people who have been subjugated and degraded, those people God has declared his favor for.

Because it's only a couple chapters later where Jesus, in talking about why he has come, says that the Spirit of the Lord is on me. Luke chapter 4, this is, of course, what Angela talked about with the prophecy of Isaiah.

The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to who? Good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for who? For the prisoners, the prison, those in jail.

He has appointed me to proclaim the good news to those who are blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. The year of the Lord's favor is bad news for those who have made the poor poor.

It is bad news for those who have imprisoned the prisoners. It is bad news who have oppressed the oppressed. The good news has some bite to it.

[13:45] Oscar Romero puts it like this. A church that doesn't provoke any crises. A gospel that doesn't unsettle. A word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin.

A word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of society in which it is being proclaimed. What gospel is that? And so we listen to who's talking.

It is not voices and people who look like me. It is black and brown and Middle Eastern and poor and pregnant and female and marginalized voices who are talking.

We take a look at who's being thrown down. It is people like me, rich and powerful and prideful and privileged. Those are the ones that God is flipping down on their head.

And we join those who are being lifted up, the weak and the humble and the hungry. We don't look at them with pity and say, oh, thank God I'm not like them. But rather we ask, how can we become more like that?

[14 : 46] Because God doesn't throw down the rich, powerful and prideful to throw them away. He is, God is always inviting everyone, everyone, everyone to join God in God's work of reconciliation and justice, making its home on earth as it is in heaven.

And so when God casts rulers from their thrones, it is an invitation to be part of something better than wealth and privilege and power. It is a part of it to be something that's shaped like Jesus, that's shaped like the cross, who God, Jesus, being in the very nature divine, did not consider his divinity something to be clung to and a privilege to be taken advantage of, but rather Jesus emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave and becoming obedient, even to the point of death, Philippians chapter 2.

That's what God is inviting all of us to, to look like Jesus, to act like Jesus, to talk like Jesus, who again was brown and poor and marginalized and ruled by a violent empire.

We join Jesus in the renewal of all things when we are willing to let go of the wealth and power and privilege and pride that defines us.

For many of us, that is a walk of sacrifice. But scripture talks about this sacrifice in terms of investment. If we gain the whole world but lose our soul, we have lost everything.

[16 : 27] But if we are willing to lose our lives, it is only then that we have anything worth living for. And so we call it a sacrifice. Oh, we sacrifice giving up our power and our wealth and our privilege, but it's not a sacrifice.

It is an invitation to a deeper and a better kind of life. And so when we look here at Christmas and Advent and the countdown to Jesus' return, when we look at all of these things, it is an invitation to be part of something better.

It is not... We don't really believe that. We think that if we give up our wealth and our power and our privilege that what's going to hurt and it's going to be a sacrifice, and we just don't want to do it because we don't believe that the way of Jesus is better.

So we listen to who's talking. We look at who's being thrown down. And we join who God is lifting up. Because God is doing a new thing.

God is doing a new thing. And we, as God's church, as Jesus' church, as the Holy Spirit's church, we have the opportunity, the possibility to join God there, which means we're going to do things different.

[17 : 35] Which means that we're going to look different. We're going to talk different. We're going to elevate different voices. And we're going to de-center the voices that are always asking to be centered. That's the kind of church that God is asking us to be.

And so as we move into the week of Christmas, as we gaze at the infant Jesus, and all that that represents about God willing to empty himself, we dare not take our eyes off of Mary.

A woman who said yes to God, let it be to me as you have said, who gave consent for God to use her in a miraculous way, but also the Mary, the Theotokos, the mother of God, who spoke out the divine no to wealth and power and pride.

We dare not take our eyes off of her, because she is blazing the trail that we are all meant to follow.