

Luke 1: 46-56

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

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Mary's Moment of Resistance

The text popped up on my phone: "Hey Fred, it's Andy. I hope it's OK, but I gave your number to my fiance. He's in a bit of a crisis and could use a pastor's voice if you have a few minutes."

"Sure" I replied.

A few minutes later the phone rang. What followed was his description of being afraid to go outside, feeling paralyzed by anxiety, obsessive thoughts swirling in his head, and inability to function. For 30 minutes we talked about anxiety, depression, and what next steps he might take to find a way through to level out. But the first words out of my mouth were some of the most important words a pastor will say: "You are not alone." I told him many suffer from depression and anxiety (including myself), and what you are describing is very similar to what I've felt before, and what I've heard so many others talk about. You are not alone."

His response: "I needed to hear that. I thought I was losing my mind."

The power of being seen, of being understood, even in the smallest degree, can literally save a life.

And, it can transform a person into being fearless. That's what happened to Mary.

Remember this story today is a response to Elizabeth coming to her, and essentially saying these words to Mary: "You are not alone." She has validation, comfort, she is seen. So she sings. And does she ever. The first Christmas carol is a doozy.

What does Mary look like in your mind's eye?

We've got a lot of romanticized notions about Mary. Beautiful, clean, the picture of health. Nice and tidy.

"Think of her in rags. Rough sandals. Unwashed. Exhausted from toil, even at this young age. Her only hope is to marry someone decent enough that she might have a room for her own family and there might be food to feed them all — and to worship their God in peace. The closest historical parallel that most Americans can imagine is the life of a 19th century enslaved black girl."

Dianna Butler Bass

And as we are more and more acquainted with the heroic actions of black enslaved girls — think Harriet Tubman for instance — we see what happens when they access their power.

Today, I'd like to introduce you to Mary, the BOSS, who gives us the longest set of words spoken by a woman in the New Testament, accessing her power.

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour 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.*

People love this first part of her song. Especially those who are not poor, not hungry, not oppressed. This keeps Mary manageable, docile. This is how I was raised to view Mary.

But the Magnificat gives us another version of Mary altogether.

As a revolutionary. Look at your Bulletin cover as I read the 2nd half of the Magnificat:

*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.*

The artist who created this woodcut, Ben Wildflower explains: "I put her fist in the air. There are enough images out there focusing on the lowliness and meekness of Mary. I wanted to make one that highlights her holy rage and her indictment of an

economic system built on idolatrous ideas about what kind of people do or don't deserve things like food and shelter. I like that Mary."

Welcome to Mary, the woman of Holy Rage.

It's so disruptive that when the King James Version was created, the British crown replaced thrones with "seats." Many countries outright banned the Magnificat from being recited in liturgy or in public.

Indeed, American slaveholders also produced a redacted Bible altogether to give to their slaves, taking out 90% of the Old Testament and 50% of the New Testament. The Magnificat, as you might imagine, didn't make the cut.

People in power have found it dangerous because they were listening closely, and what they heard is what Episcopal priest and writer Broderick Greer calls an anthem of liberation that envisions an Israel free of Roman occupation, as well as God's promise of liberation."

Further, he provocatively states: "In (Mary's words) we see a God who is setting the world right. When we see Mary's song, questions arise about how Jesus was brought up. Questions around what might have been whispered into Jesus' ear by his mother, the revolutionary, the rebel. We are led to wonder whether Joseph received his proclivity for risk from Mary. We are led to wonder whether Jesus inherited his rebellious nature from Mary. We are led to wonder whether Mary's rebel anthem moonlighted as Jesus' lullaby."

When Jesus grows up and preaches "blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" and "woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry" in the Sermon on the Plain later in Luke, I'm sure there were a few in the crowd that stood there, shaking their heads thinking: "Well that apple didn't fall far from the tree."

The Magnificat informs the good news Jesus would later preach. In his first sermon in Nazareth, it is good news for the poor. Good news for those who continue to be crushed in a world that thrives on exploitation and injustice. Good news for those needing liberation.

But the Magnificat is actually really good news too for those who ARE well-fed, or rich, or in a position of power and might and benefit from systems that oppress others. Like me. It shows us that our path of liberation is to use our position and privilege to lean into the values of Jesus, to lift up the poor, to center their voices, to learn how oppression works, to learn from those on the margins, and to find God has been there all along.

The late author Rachel Held-Evans put it like this: “With the Magnificat, Mary not only announces a birth, she announces the inauguration of a new kingdom, one that stands in stark contrast to every other kingdom — past, present, and future — that relies on violence and exploitation to achieve ‘greatness.’ With the Magnificat, Mary declares that God has indeed chosen sides.

And it’s not with the powerful, but the humble.

It’s not with the rich, but with the poor.

It’s not with the occupying force, but with people on the margins.

It’s not with narcissistic kings, but with an un-wed, un-believed teenage girl entrusted with the holy task of birthing, nursing, and nurturing God.

This is the stunning claim of the incarnation: God has made a home among the very people the world casts aside. And in her defiant prayer, Mary — a dark-skinned woman, a refugee, a religious minority in an occupied land — names this reality.

Courageous Mary whose boldness was passed down to her son to reveal the loving heart of God, and show us a new way of being in the world. Courageous Mary, who proclaimed that her story and God’s story were one, that God’s dream of liberation and salvation was HER story.

Courageous Mary who just through the act of giving birth, sanctified the holiness and courage of birthing children. Contractions, tearing, bleeding, cracking, trying to get a baby to latch, postpartum depression perhaps. Theologian Kat Armas writes “We talk about Jesus’ body being broken for us but we don’t talk enough about how Mary’s body was broken for his. The savior of the world was completely dependent on her most vulnerable and intimate body parts.”

In our theological tradition, we don’t pray directly to Mary. But can’t you see why the vast majority of Christians in human history have? If I ever do take up the practice of praying to someone other than the God revealed in Jesus, it would be her. So let’s pray to Jesus and ask Jesus to give us the courage of Mary that we might resist where need be, to be agents of God’s joy and justice in the world. Amen.