

Service 1

Vulnerability and Strength

FOCUS STATEMENT

In the *Magnificat*, we find that one of the oldest Christian hymns is placed on the lips of a young, pregnant virgin. Mary's courageous words put the rulers and the rich in their place and reveal the strength of a woman who trusts in God. Likewise, the recognition of her "humble state" points to a vulnerability that confides in God to sustain her strength. Mary's hymn challenges all followers of Christ to consider what it means to embody both strength and vulnerability in living out God's call.

GATHERING

Call to worship

Leader: We are human creatures, given shape by God's hands and given life by God's breath. In our humanness, we are strong. In our humanness, we are vulnerable.

People: Strength and vulnerability are gifts from God.

Leader: Some of us might be filled to the brim with conceit, power, or wealth. Some of us might be overwhelmed by shame, oppression, or economic struggle.

People: Together, we long for liberation.

Leader: With strength and vulnerability, Mary sings of a time when those

with too much will be relieved of the burden of excess and those with too little will be given their fair share.

All: May it be so among us. Let God's mercy come.

Consider also:

Hymnal: A Worship Book #683

Hymnal: A Worship Book #715

Sing the Journey #123

Sing the Story #132

CONFESSION & ASSURANCE

God of grace, we open our spirits before you.

We who are comfortable exhibiting strength are often afraid of allowing ourselves to become vulnerable.

We who are comfortable exhibiting vulnerability are often terrified of asserting our strength.

The fear in us is what keeps us from you and from one another.

We long to be secure in the knowledge that we are loved and worthwhile.

Come, and take away our fear.

Come, and assure us that we are full of worth and deserving of love.

Come, teach us to be comfortable in strength, comfortable in vulnerability, comfortable in the full range of expression that you wove into human life.

(Pause.)

Know that you are God's beloved creation. Be assured that whatever may come, this will never change. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:41-55: Consider sharing the Scripture in a mini-drama of two women (Elizabeth preferably older and Mary younger—possibly showing Elizabeth's pregnancy) in order to emphasize the way Elizabeth's blessing and Mary's song take place as a sort of dialogue between the two women.

STUDYING THE WORD & SHARING OUR STORIES

Mary's song in Luke 1 (often called the *Magnificat* after the line "My soul magnifies the Lord" in Latin) introduces us to a young woman of surprising courage, one who "said yes" to God and, in doing so, partnered in bringing forth the greatest miracle since the creation of the world.

In seeking to rediscover Mary's story today, we face challenges: the virgin of Nazareth is among the most debated figures in Christian history. It is tempting to over-emphasize Mary's strength—her almost abstract holiness—and lose sight of her status as a human like us. It is also tempting to over-emphasize Mary's vulnerability, her everyday humanness, and lose sight of her special role in God's interaction with the world.

This two-sided challenge also relates to Mary *as a woman*. On the one hand, the *Magnificat* is a genderless song that could be sung by a man or a woman. It is rich with allusions to Hebrew Scripture (see, for instance, Ex 20:6; Pss 138, 71, 111, 107; 1 Sam 2:1-10). It also manifests the Beatitudes her son would go on to proclaim, in line with the prophetic vision of God as a champion of the *anawim*, the poor and the oppressed. Indeed, it is not a stretch to imagine that Jesus' reading of the scroll in Luke 4:18-19 and his preaching about the poor and the wealthy in Luke 6:20-26 have their roots in his mother's teaching and example, highlighted for us by Luke's account of her song only chapters before.

For this reason, the *Magnificat* has been a powerful force in activist movements like Latin American liberation theology. Mary's song is a spiritual and political inspiration and challenge for *all of us*. This perspective is buoyed up by the recent archaeological research confirming that Nazareth was a poor town, with absolutely no material evidence of wealth or power. Its inhabitants, including Mary, were impoverished peasants whose labor went to support the wealthy few of the Roman Empire and Jewish aristocracy. Residents of Nazareth would have seen their attempts at resistance cut down with harsh violence. When Mary sings of God scattering the proud, bringing down rulers, and sending the rich away empty, she does so "from below," making provocative claims about the Holy One's outlook on society—then and now.

On the other hand, when we focus exclusively on the general spiritual or political implications of Mary's song, we may forget its profound

significance as the song of a woman. Mary was a vulnerable peasant Jew living under Roman occupation, but she was also vulnerable because of her gender. She lived in a time when it was growing increasingly common for Jewish men to thank God each day for not being born a slave, Gentile, or woman. The fact that God chose to work with a woman, to bring reconciliation to the world *through her body*, to become incarnate *within her womb*, to enter the world *through her birth canal*, to rely on nourishment *from her breasts* is a fact that we should not overlook.

Elizabeth, too, highlights Mary's gender: "Blessed are you *among women*," she cries. And before turning to the broader social implications of God's work in the world in verses 50-55, Mary begins her song with a much more personal recognition of God's unique work in her own life (vv. 46-49). The humility (as a peasant in occupied territory, but also as a *woman*) from which the Savior has lifted Mary up is a vivid parallel to the more general humble positions God recognizes and honors. In other words, Mary boldly draws larger implications for the world from her own experience—and that is the experience of a woman undergoing the surprises of an unexpected pregnancy.

Mary of Nazareth was not alone in experiencing a particular sort humble state: throughout the millennia of church history, women's bodies have been viewed with suspicion, women's experiences held in low regard. (Consider second-century Tertullian's claim that women are "the Devil's gateway," Augustine's fifth-century speculation that women's embodiment means they are not image-bearers of God, John Knox's sixteenth-century tract against the "Monstrous Regiment of Women," or even very recent claims that women may teach men theology only when their womanliness remains inconspicuous and unthreatening.) It is not accidental that the courageous and humble words of the *Magnificat* are voiced not just by *any* person but by a woman who menstruated (and then didn't), who perhaps felt morning sickness and round ligament pain, was perhaps stigmatized for an unexpected pregnancy, and who went on to wipe children's noses and bottoms—including the nose and bottom of the Son of God.

Luke 1:41-55 reminds us that women's particular stories (including those of pregnancy and childbirth) are a worthy source of theological reflection; the passage also reminds us that brave sharing often occurs within dialogues, as Elizabeth's Spirit-inspired blessing calls forth Mary's

bold song. This lesson in dialogue and particularity is important as we approach Mary's story, which at points has been used to define womanhood in terms of mothering and submission in ways that limit and harm. Rather than *the* story of what it means to be an embodied woman, Mary reminds us that our myriad experiences offer opportunities to learn both courage and trust as we follow God together.

Mary's song—and the often-untold stories of pregnancy, pregnancy loss, childbirth and child-rearing, chosen and unchosen childlessness, celibate and more expressive sexuality—reminds us, again and again, of the strength and vulnerability present in women as well as men. Created in God's image, women—embodied women, with varying degrees of curves and swells and hormones—have profound lessons to teach the church, not in spite of our particular capacity or incapacity to bear life, but at times because of it. Our various stories are a layered harmony, our creativity a many-versed hymn. Mary's song is both the song of a young, pregnant, peasant virgin and also a song for the lips of all who seek to embody the creative courage and trust of a pilgrim people.

REFLECTING & RESPONDING

Large or small group: Before the service, hand out printouts of the Scripture passage, printed with space between each line of the *Magnificat*. In a time of silence or with music in the background, encourage participants to respond to the message by adding their own words of song between the lines of Mary's song. For example, ask participants to describe personal experiences of the manifestation of God's activities that Mary names.

Small group: Divide into groups or pairs to consider some or all of the following questions.

- How have Mary's story and song been a part of your faith journey in the past? What factors have influenced your appreciation for Mary's example?
- How does the *Magnificat* highlight the dynamic relationship between vulnerability and strength in our discipleship of Christ?

- Who comes to mind as a contemporary example of Mary's trust and courage?
- If you feel comfortable, share your own stories of lessons learned from pregnancy, infertility, childbirth, parenting, loss, other forms of creativity and nurturing, or even social stigmatization. How does your story resonate with Mary's?

SENDING BLESSING

As you go from here, may you be filled with song. May you be vulnerable enough to listen closely and discern its words. May you be strong enough to sing them loudly.

SONG SUGGESTIONS

Here in this place (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #6)
 My soul proclaims with wonder (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #181)
 My soul is filled with joy (*Sing the Journey* #13)
 God is our refuge and strength (*Sing the Journey* #26)
 Like a mother who has borne us (*Sing the Journey* #91)
 Magnificat (*Sing the Story* #12)
 Sing we a song of high revolt (*Sing the Story* #13)
 My soul cries out (*Sing the Story* #124)

VISUAL SUGGESTIONS

Collect photographs and pieces of art that depict women. These can be women from your congregation, women from around the world, artful representations of women, or a combination. Be sure to choose images that display a diverse range of identities (age, race and ethnicity, body shape, etc.) and expressions (contemplative, active, peaceful, fierce, calm, energetic, etc.). It is best if at least several images are large enough to be seen clearly by those who will be seated farthest away. Put these images together as a large collage that will serve as the center visual for the service. Consider an arrangement of candles near the collage to symbolize the life and vitality represented by those depicted.