

Sermon Starter and Response – Song of Mary

Luke 1:41-55

Sermon Starter

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 of 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. Cre-

ated 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.

Response

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?

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