

## SINGING OURSELVES RIGHT SIDE UP

A pastor recalls that when in seminary the final exam in her theology class consisted of but one question: “Defend the grammar of the Magnificat.” Think about that a moment. Mary’s song, the Magnificat, is sung as though God has already righted the world, or as one author puts it:

How can Mary sing that the Lord has done great things for her? It’s a little crazy: how can this young, lower-class girl who finds herself knocked up sing that God has already--in the past tense--ended injustice and oppression? All she has to do is look around her to find evidence to the contrary.

Are things really any different for us as we hear Mary’s song today or sing a paraphrase, “The promise made in ages past at last has come to be, for God has come in power to save, to set all people free.” Really? How does this match up with our present reality of a pandemic not just of COVID-19 but of racism, classism, income disparity, political division, and just outright hostility to others? Is it any wonder that the verb tense of the Magnificat is problematic? Mary may sing that the Might One has done great things, but people are still hungry, oppressed, violated. It’s as if as one author puts it, Mary is “...with eyes of faith and a hopeful ear ... able to discern that the future God has planned is bleeding back into the here and now.”

Mary’s words are powerful – they are revolutionary. It has been said that when Luther translated the Bible into German, he left the Magnificat in Latin because the German princes who supported Luther’s struggles with Rome took a dim view of the mighty being brought down from their thrones.

What’s your favorite Christmas carol or Christmas song? Why does it continue to speak to you year after year? Is the comfort, the joy, the hope, the love, the possibility? This morning, I’d like to suggest that the greatest Christmas carol in history was not written by Irving Berlin or Nat King Cole. The greatest carol is not “Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer” (even if it was written by an alum of my alma mater) or “White Christmas” or, dare I say, even “Silent Night.” The greatest carol was composed 2,000 years ago by a pregnant teenage girl who was visiting her relative Elizabeth. After Elizabeth pronounced a blessing, Mary responded in song. Listen carefully, there is a pattern to her song.

God has brought down the ruler, but lifted up the humble;  
God has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent  
the rich away empty.  
Scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts,  
but been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

God is reversing everything: who is in, who’s out; who’s up, who’s down. Who the winners are; who the losers are. Mary seems to charge the world with having gotten things pretty much exactly wrong. Our world said: blessed are the beautiful. Blessed are the rich. Blessed are the successful. Blessed are the secure. Mary said that now God’s going to turn everything upside

down. Is this reminding you of anyone else? According to Luke, at the start of Jesus' ministry Jesus went to the synagogue and began by quoting Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
 because he has anointed me  
 to bring good news to the poor.  
 He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
 and recovery of sight to the blind,  
 to let the oppressed go free,  
 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And later, Jesus pronounces blessings on the most unlikely folks: the poor, the hungry, those who weep. Where did he get this stuff? Could it have been from his mom? Did he learn from her that God has no intention of tolerating the injustice and greed of this world on a permanent basis? Did she teach him that it angers God when people are selfish or violent, when rich people watch poor people go hungry and do nothing, when the powerful push around the weak because they can get away with it? What stories are you telling your children, your grandchildren, your nieces and nephews? What stories do you share with your spouse, your parents, your neighbors, your friends? What are your stories – our stories – proclaiming? What world are we envisioning and in essence speaking into being? I think about the folks I see and read about who are so angry that they are willing to ignore all scientific and factual reality. What stories were they told as children? What stories have they been hearing throughout their lives?

One author has suggested that at its core, Mary's song proclaims a politics of mercy. Wow, is that ever in short supply these days. I haven't seen much mercy lately, have you? And it just seems to get worse and worse. Yet, here's Mary. She should have been overlooked, even rejected. She should have been dismissed from her community, distrusted, disbelieved, and doubted. She should have been silenced, separated out as one not worthy of God's love, let alone one trusted to testify to God's love for the least in the world. Which is why in her song she has to give witness to how much God's mercy matters, what difference it makes, for her. In her case, it meant that she was seen and regarded. She was cared for and called. She was lifted up and because she was, so also all of the lowly will know that promise, too.

Thank God for Mary's song, to call us back to our senses. To not only make us aware of our topsy turvy world, but to offer us hope for a different reality. But how can a song make such a difference we may ask? Because it allows us to keep imagining – dreaming. We cannot hope for a different world if we cannot imagine it. We cannot realize change until we can dream the change we wish to see. Mary's song lifts up images and ideas, hopes and goals, to which we can aspire, if only because we can see them and say, Amen, may it be so. As Tom Dipko has written in the Foreword to *The New Century Hymnal*:

Hymns are more than the sum of their parts. They become for us a language that transcends human speech. They are the poetry of eternity within time. They are signs of grace that comes from beyond ourselves.

If we are to sing our way into a new reality we will need to use words, poetry, images, metaphors that point to a world we have yet to realize. But by singing these words, we join Mary and countless generations who have worked to birth God's reality into ours.

AMEN.