

**Magnifying God**  
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Luke 1:47-55

Our lesson for today, comes to us from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 1, 10 little verses known as The Song of Mary, the Magnificat. Before I read them, a little context. Luke 1 as a whole is a kind of overture to the birth narrative in Luke 2. And curiously the whole set up for this, for Mary and Gabriel and the holy pregnancy and birth, begins like this: “in the days of King Herod there was a priest named Zechariah...” More on that later.

Luke’s overture continues on with the so-called “annunciation” scene, where this poor, young, unwed Jewish girl, receives a messenger from God, bearing this perplexing, even dangerous invitation to birth a most Beloved child. Mary says simply yes. And then, immediately sets out on a perilous journey, all on her own, to the home of her cousin Elizabeth, who is also unexpectedly expecting. And it is there, in pregnant solidarity, that Mary sings her song, “the most passionate, wildest, even revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung” in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It went something like this (Luke 1:46-55, Inclusive Bible translation):

*My soul magnifies you, O God  
and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.  
For you have looked with favor  
upon your lowly servant,  
and from this day forward  
all generations will call me blessed.  
For you, the Almighty, have done great things for me, and holy is your Name.  
Your mercy reaches from age to age  
for those who fear you.  
You have shown strength with your arm;  
you have scattered the proud in their conceit; you have deposed the mighty from their  
thrones and raised the lowly to high places.  
You have filled the hungry with good things, while you have sent the rich away empty.  
You have come to the aid of Israel your servant, mindful of your mercy –  
the promise you made to our ancestors –  
to Sarah and Abraham  
and their descendants forever.*

Mary lived in difficult and dangerous times. We, too, are living in difficult and dangerous times, especially if you happen to be a person of color, gay, transgender, poor, Jewish, Muslim, and yes, female. Direct, violent assaults on all of the above, literal and figurative, are happening daily in our lives, on our streets, in the halls of congress and the white house, and in way too many churches across this land today. Its also challenging in a whole different way to be a person of privilege these days. We are being asked to face, in a whole new way, just how deeply toxic and deformative our systems of patriarchy and white supremacy really are, and to recognize how much we

benefit from them. As a well off, white, straight, cisgender woman I feel a bit like I have a foot in both places—it is a demanding moment to be a person of privilege, and it is an exceptionally painful and infuriating time to be a woman. Women are, all of us, in some way, confronting the full destructive reality of systematic misogyny in the world, and in our own personal histories.

So much suffering and anger; who wants to deal with all that? Is it any wonder that the more power we have, the more powerful the urge to turn away, to block it out, to deny it entirely. And that requires us to exclude and silence the voices of the truth tellers, so we can protect our delusions of safety, awesomeness and innocence. Those at the margins can see and name things invisible to those in the center. When we silence them, it shields us from having to open ourselves to the experience, perspective and suffering of the other. Which also, by the way, prevents change, healing, transformation, both individual and collective.

There are so many voices calling out from margins these days, but this particular moment is magnifying the voices of women. Time Magazine last week honored as their person of the year the Silence Breakers, all those speaking out about abuse. This moment has been a long time coming. Tarana Burke, a woman of color and activist, who has dedicated her life to helping victims of sexual assault, founded the “me too” movement *more than a decade ago*. She has said, “if you center the most marginalized voices, it brings everyone along with you.”

The Reverend Denise Anderson, current Co-Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA), another prophetic woman of color, points out that we “silence the voices of women (in particular) because what they have to say hurts us.” When they tell the truth, she continues, “as many currently are – our notions of the inherent goodness of people (can) be irreparably shattered. When women speak, humanity is exposed.”

On this Advent Sunday, with Mary’s glorious song ringing out (in our lectionary) I’m willing to bet that most preachers will go to John the Baptist, or Isaiah, or the psalmist, or even Paul’s letter before they will tangle with Mary. (That Mary. She’s kinda shrill, you know...) And let’s be clear: not only are most preachers still men, most churches still bar women’s voices from the pulpit entirely. (just think about that—the whole world over)

And yet, our spiritual heritage, despite endless distortions, stands firmly against the silencing of women. In the Old Testament, the Creator Spirit herself is a feminine presence, Wisdom is a woman crying out for justice, and God’s very compassion is described as “wombish.” (And you know, it might be worth asking women just what that might mean.) The ancient stories of our tradition offer us powerful songs of justice, liberation and joy from Miriam at the Exodus, Deborah, Israel’s most faithful and effective judge (WHY do we never talk about Deborah?), plus Hannah, Judith and a host of other fierce women of faith. In the Gospels stories, women (immigrant women) teach Jesus a thing or two about the fullness of compassion, and it is the women who discover the empty tomb and proclaim the resurrection, while the men refuse to listen, and keep missing the point.

In her book *Fierce: Women of the Bible and Their Stories of Violence, Mercy, Bravery, Wisdom, Sex and Salvation*, author Alice Conner says that we must recover these lost stories, not

for the sake of women, but for all people of faith, for the fullness of our faith. Our women's circle, by the way, has been exploring this book all fall; and I'm guessing they'd be delighted to share it with our men.

Mary would have been shaped and formed by so many of these stories, and Mary is surely the fiercest of them all. She, too, calls from the margins, this key figure in the whole unfolding story of salvation, which is to say healing, liberation and return. The early church understood Mary as so central to God's project, that very early on she was given the title "theotokos," God-bearer. And yet, over time, she has been marginalized, romanticized, trivialized and sometimes just erased. Catholics put her up on a pedestal, at a safe distance way above us all. Protestants are mostly content to leave her in the stable with the sheep, and just drag her out and dust her off once a year or so; although once in a while, we do sing her some songs, you know, Mary mother, meek and mild.

Which, while comforting, also obscures the real, human Mary of the gospels, woman, fierce and wild. Her powerful trust in holy mercy and courageous surrender to love empowers her yes to that dangerous birthing call, a yes that continues to transform. Mary doesn't just participate in the Holy, she magnifies, enlarges and changes Divine possibility. "Mary enters into co-creation with God" writes theologian Elizabeth Johnson in her ground breaking book *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary and the Communion of the Saints*.

And just to underscore the point here, Luke gives us a fabulous contrast in the story of that old priest Zechariah. When God's messenger informs him of the dubious pregnancy of his elderly wife Elizabeth, Zechariah responds with skepticism. He demands answers he declaring: *How will I know this is so?* Writer Kathleen Norris points out that while Zechariah is hung up on knowledge and information, Mary welcomes wisdom. So, while Mary gives birth to hope, Zechariah is silenced by God, for the duration of those long pregnant months. This apparent punishment, according to Norris, may actually be a gift of grace, because it gives him the space that he needs to ponder -- his arrogance and God's mystery.

And I would add, that silence enables him to hear the women. Because when Mary arrives on the scene, she and her cousin Elizabeth sing great songs of joy together, while the powerful priest can only listen. And what a song young Mary sings, a powerful cry of protest and liberation—personal, social, moral and economic. A revolutionary song, praising God's continuing presence and action, especially on behalf of all marginal and exploited people. This is the lullaby that formed and inspired Jesus, and it is a song for all lovers of justice and peace.

And one more thing—it is a song of joy. This may be the most important thing that Mary has to tell us this day; joy is not just possible in the face of darkness, it is essential. Joy is a form of resistance, one that empowers us to choose life again and again, even when the forces of anger, hatred and death loom so large. Tarana Burke has said, "learning to cultivate joy saved my life."

Its true, the world is a hot mess, and most of it is really old news. What seems new is a terrible new clarity. And I think our only hope is to keep facing it all head on, to keep listening carefully and intentionally to all those voices begging us to hear deep truth. As James Baldwin said decades ago—not everything that is faced can be changed, but

nothing can be changed until it is faced. We desperately need to recognize the distortions and abuses of power that allow racism, sexism, heterosexism and every other form of marginalization to survive and thrive in our midst. We must take seriously the experiences of women, listen deeply to people of color, honor the stories of our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender neighbors, near and far. We must be courageous enough to sit in the discomfort this brings. And it just might help if we listen to Mary a little more often. She invites us to trust in Holy Mystery, to insist on justice, to believe in the power of compassion, and to cultivate joy no matter what. Because God is with us, in us, among us, calling us all to be theotokos, God-bearers, and as Mary shows us, only yes will do.

And you know, even old Zechariah comes around to yes, but only after that long period of silence, pondering, and listening to Mary and Elizabeth and God. That inspires his song, which concludes Luke's overture in chapter 1, and ends with some of my favorite words in all of scripture: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

May this be so.