

Based on *Luke 1:46-55. Mary Claims Her Power.

*Incarnational translation below

The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism by Katherine Stewart.

This is the book our Adult Education Committee has chosen to read for our weekly Sunday Seminar series, beginning last Sunday and continuing through December. Chosen, in part, because Christian nationalism is on the rise in our country and because, as Stewart herself points out, *some of the most powerful resistance to Christian nationalism may ultimately come from those who identify as Christians themselves* (p 10).

So what is Christian nationalism, and why should we, who also identify as Christian, work powerfully to resist it? Put simply, Stewart states, Christian nationalism is an identity based authoritarian movement in which *a small number of people ... harness the passions, resentments, and insecurities of a large and diverse population in their own quest for power* (p 7). That power is then manipulated, slowly but steadily, to subvert democratic institutions into a theocratic state grounded on their particular version of Christianity, in which rule by force and hierarchical submission maintain strict control over the populace. Witness the scene in the Senate Chamber during the January 6th insurrection, invoking the name of Jesus and “consecrating” the Senate to his purpose.

Specifically, according to Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, Christian nationalism promotes a particular inaccurate narrative about America, including the following threads:

1. America is a divinely appointed nation by God that is Christian.
2. America’s founders ... establish[ed] a nation based on Christian principles, with white men as the leaders.
3. Others (Native Americans, enslaved Africans, and immigrants) should accept and cede this narrative of America as a Christian nation, and accept their leadership.
4. America has a special place not only in world history, but in biblical Scripture.

Quite the opposite of The Way of Jesus you and I proclaim here at SPC. A proclamation that, I would insist, we make *in light* of Scripture, not in spite of Scripture.

As Tyler points out, *Christian nationalism is not Christianity*. And, I would argue, it is not biblical, either.

Take, for example, today’s Lesson from Luke. As Presbyterians we read the Bible through the lens of Jesus, interpreting every other part of the biblical narrative and developing a theological ethic for personal and social living through his life and death and resurrection. Beginning right here in Luke’s Gospel, with what me might call the pre-natal care of Jesus.

Mary, as we know, is the mother of Jesus, blessed by the Spirit of God to bear the very Son of God. Less obvious in the text, but well known in its historical context, is Mary’s own experience of religious nationalism

at the hands of the Roman Empire, which has invaded her homeland and violently established itself as an occupying power, forcing her and her countrymen into worship of the emperor.

To top it all off, Nazareth, where Mary lives, is about as far away from the so-called “centers of power” as you can get. As an unwed, pregnant teenager, Mary is powerless among the powerless. Frantic, we might presume, and utterly depressed.

But Mary refuses to relinquish her own intrinsic power in our Lesson from Luke today. *To be alive is Power*, Mary declares, in the spirit of today’s poet, Emily Dickinson. I WILL be called blessed! I belong to God, Mary reminds herself - and us - and nobody else should try to claim me as their own. I claim my power in service to the common good, Mary says, and thereby will change the world. And in a song for the ages, Mary sings the mighty power of the creative spirit flowing through her.

Imagine, then, the lullabies Mary sings to her son as she cradles him, first in her womb and then in her arms. *Compassion comes*, Mary sings to Jesus, *when we turn toward God with reverence*. God’s power comes to help, Mary sings to Jesus, for those who *struggle to persevere*. *Powerful rulers fall from their thrones*, Mary sings to Jesus, and *wealth is dismissed as irrelevant*. This is what God’s power looks like, Mary sings to Jesus. And Jesus learns his lessons well.

As an adult, Jesus does indeed take Mary’s teachings to the public square, but not with the power of autocratic force. Instead Jesus embodies the power of non-violent, radical love, grounded - to the delight of his mother - on a central concern for the poor, the captive, the sick, and the oppressed. Even when his movement seems to fail at the hands of an autocratic, theocratic state, the power of resurrection radiates throughout the land and the movement of love grows stronger and stronger.

A far cry from the narrative of Christian nationalism proclaimed throughout our land today!

But *power is the ultimate aphrodisiac*, Henry Kissinger says, and the pastor in me has some sympathy for Christian nationalists caught in the grip of power’s lust. I especially have sympathy for those whose genuine Christian faith, although it may differ from our own heartfelt theological convictions, is manipulated by those in the grip of power’s lust. But lust for power is, after all, a deadly sin, as evidenced again by the January 6th insurrection. In the case of Christian nationalism, according to Amanda Tyler, it is also the greatest current threat to religious liberty, not only in our own nation but also around the world.

Which is why we at SPC cannot simply ignore the rise of Christian nationalism or wish it away or reject our own Christian heritage out of fear of being compared with what we cannot abide in this movement. To do so would be like Mary crawling into a hole in shame, relinquishing her existence to a fate beyond her control, and sabotaging her son from saving the world. This cannot be an option for us.

Even the least among us can and must be powerful thinkers and speakers in our present age, even when we think we have nothing to say in response to religious nationalism. This is the witness of the song of Mary. Every one of us can speak - or sing! - what we know of The Way of Jesus, even when our voice shakes.

Mary, herself, may have a target on her back, but she bravely and prophetically turns power on its ear. We can, too. We hold power in our very being Mary sings to us today, and we hold the power of our children, who we shape and guide and love and nurture through our lullabies and our stories and our dreams for them and for the world they will inherit. Every time we want to shy away from the debate around Christian nationalism, Mary calls us with conviction: never forget our children are worth it.

Just imagine how future generations will perceive us, Mary's song insists, at this moment in human history. How will future generations speak of the choices we make right now in flexing the paradoxical power of non-violent radical love in The Way of Jesus? Will they, too, call us Blessed? The choice is ours. Which turns out to be the point.

At the end of the day, the Christian movement, launched by Mary in our Lesson today, turns out to be a simple but powerful choice: to live in joyful and loving resistance to tyrannical power. The exact opposite of Christian nationalism.

Our job, in the face of rising Christian nationalism, is to present that choice in the public square even more clearly. To align ourselves even more closely with the Marys of the world: those who are powerless even among the powerless. To join them in imagining, with great dignity, a better world through and for our children.

Our job is to claim, in the face of rising Christian nationalism, the words of Edward Everett Hale, who says, *I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something.*

What will that something be?

*Luke 1:46-55

Mary sings,
“My soul soars with gratitude toward the Holy One.
My spirit fills with joy toward God my Savior.
For the divine gaze envelops this humble, hurting woman.

“Generations to come will point to my blessings.
For the One of Power has acted powerfully for me.
Holy is the name of the Lord!

“Compassion comes, from one generation to the next,

when we turn toward God with reverence.

“God’s power looks like this:
prideful thoughts dissipate;
powerful rulers fall from their thrones;
humble service takes center stage;
hunger is satisfied;
wealth is dismissed as irrelevant.

“Today, the power of God has come to help us,
we who struggle to persevere,
we who remind ourselves of divine compassion,
just as God helped our ancestors,
- Abraham and his descendants -
just as God will help our descendants,
even until the end of the age.”

“Incarnational translation for preaching seeks to recontextualize biblical texts so that they say and do in new times and places something like what they said and did in ancient times and places” (Cosgrove and Edgerton, **In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching, 62).*