

Texts: **Luke 1:39-45, (46b-55)**

Date: 19<sup>th</sup> December 2021

## **Introduction**

Sadly, one doesn't have to travel too far into the past to arrive at the time when women's voices were not heard. Indeed, in our church, some women still feel that they are not treated equally. For generations, men have told our sacred stories. Men have decided which stories made it into the canon of Sacred Scriptures. Men have interpreted the stories that were allowed to be told. Men have translated, taught, and commented upon those stories from pulpits, in Bible Colleges, in universities, in commentaries and in the public square. Today, as more and more women take on the tasks of translating, interpreting, writing, teaching, preaching, and imagining the texture of our sacred stories are changing in ways that our mothers and grandmothers may not have been able to imagine.

This morning, I'd like to invite you to imagine with me a radical re-telling of the birth narratives; a re-telling based on the New Testament, a retelling based on good sound historical scholarship.

What does it mean to wait for God in a broken world? What does it mean to wait in a time in which God's promise of redemption is met by the despair of the poor, the greed of those who exploit others, and the rage of those who commit violence? What does Advent mean for the *real* world? Believe it or not Mary had some thoughts on that. It's in the words of the Magnificat that the gospel reveals the revolutionary Mary.

I love the Magnificat! The first verses were always familiar to me: *"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour."* Same for the next few lines about Mary being overwhelmed at the goodness of God looking upon a humble girl, that God is mighty and has done great things, that God is holy and will bless those who fear him.

But then comes this *“He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.”* Throughout history, poor and oppressed people had often identified with this song — the longest set of words spoken by a woman in the New Testament.

Oscar Romero, priest and martyr, drew a comparison between Mary and the poor and powerless people in his own community.

Truly the Magnificat is a powerful poem that holds together the grittiness of life on the margins and the resilient hope of those who trust in God. However, let’s not sugar-coat Mary. Mary found herself pregnant and not yet married in an ancient culture she faced an uncertain future at best and devastating retribution from her community at worst. Indeed, the Gospel of Matthew is careful to note that Joseph planned to dismiss her quietly rather than expose her to public humiliation ([Matt 1:18-19](#)): the latter scenario could theoretically have included stoning for adultery, according to Jewish law.

So honestly, I don’t envision Mary as the radiant woman peacefully composing the Magnificat in Marie Ellenrieder’s 1833 painting, but as a girl who sings defiantly to her God through her tears, fists clenched against an unknown future. Let’s be clear, Mary’s courageous song of praise is a radical resource for those seeking to honour the holy amid the suffering and conflicts of real life. Revolutionaries, the poor and the oppressed, all loved Mary and they emphasized her glorious song. I am sure you can understand why that she is popular amongst the poor and oppressed.

And it won’t surprise you that the Magnificat has been viewed as dangerous by people in power. Do you know some countries have outright banned the Magnificat from being recited in liturgy or in public?

- During the British rule in India, the singing of the Magnificat in church was prohibited because of its inflammable words. So, on the final day of British rule in India, Gandhi,

who was not a Christian, requested that this song be read in all places where the British flag was being lowered.

- During the 1980s, the government of Guatemala found the ideas raised by Mary's proclamation of God's special concern for the poor to be so dangerous and revolutionary that the government banned any public recitation of Mary's words.
- The dictatorship in Argentina banned Mary's song after the Mothers of the Disappeared displayed its words on placards in the capital plaza.

The Magnificat is the text Mary defiantly shouts when she meets Elizabeth.

The Magnificat is a revolutionary text full of historical meaning which would have been clear to its first century listeners. But the radical nature of Mary's shouts has been lost as successive generations have set it to music and prettied it up, robbing Mary of her powerful defiance.

She's a young woman singing a song about toppling rulers from their thrones. She's a radical who exists within the confines of institutionalized religion. The author of the gospel of Luke, does not intend her to be seen as "Mother Mary meek and mild." Mary's shouts would have reminded first century listeners, of other heroines of Israel, of revolution and of war. The Magnificat is written in the style of other declarations from strong women in Israel's history.

Elizabeth addresses Mary as "**Blessed...among women**. This was not a normal greeting. There are only two other texts in the Scriptures where this phrase is used. In the Book of Judges, Deborah, who was herself a prophetess and a judge of Israel sings, "*Blessed among women be Jael*". And Deborah's song goes on to tell us who Jael was and what she did. Mary's song takes on new meaning when heard within the context of violence and rape. Mary's child would grow to respond to violence and rape by calling not for more violence, but for justice.

On this fourth Sunday we are focusing on LOVE. Jesus' way of being LOVE in the world holds the promise of ending endless cycles of violence by delivering justice. I believe with all my heart that love is the way.

Unfortunately, news of sexual assault charges levied against powerful and privileged men continue to haunt us. A new report found the last eight years domestic violence in Australia saw 29,000 people hospitalised. Two-thirds were women. The finding from a new report also found an increase in women experiencing domestic violence from their partner for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic. And what about the toxicity of Australia's parliament for the women who worked there?

Women everywhere continue to shout out for a heroine like Mary, a rebel whose Magnificat speaks to the hopes and dreams of all those who continue to struggle for equality and justice for everyone. Mary's song promises that God brings about wondrous reversals in the world: showing favour to lowly and ignored, rendering ineffectual the collusions of the arrogant ("scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts"); bringing down those who exploit positions of power; lifting up the poor.

Undoubtedly the Magnificat is GOOD NEWS for the poor, the oppressed, the lowly, and downtrodden. Theologian Warren Carter writes that in the time of Jesus, 2 to 3 percent of the population was rich, while the majority lived a subsistence-level existence.

Do you know the world's richest people got a whole lot richer during the COVID-19 crisis? In 2021, billionaires saw the steepest increase in their share of wealth on record. The top 0.01% richest individuals—the 520,000 people who have at least \$19 million— now hold 11% of the world's wealth, up a full percentage point from 2020.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the share of global wealth owned by billionaires has grown from 1% in 1995 to 3% in 2021. The jump

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://fortune.com/2021/12/07/worlds-richest-inequality-richer-during-pandemic/>

comes as governments around the world poured money into their economies to mitigate the economic pain created by pandemic shutdowns. But that money also boosted stock prices and real estate values, adding to the wealth of top-earning individuals

So, what about us? Probably the song doesn't sound like GOOD NEWS for us who are well fed, or rich, or in a position of power and might — or if you benefit from systems that oppress. How does the Magnificat feel if you aren't one of the lowly, if you aren't as vulnerable and humble as Mary? Certainly, it is good news to those on the outer, and bad news to those who misused their wealth, power, and privilege.

The Magnificat calls us to live a different way, to change allegiances, to reevaluate our values and to be a part of God's Kin-dom. Sister Elizabeth Johnson sums it up well, *"The Magnificat is a revolutionary song of salvation whose political, economic, and social dimensions cannot be blunted. People in need in every society hear a blessing in this canticle. The battered woman, the single parent without resources, those without food on the table or without even a table, the homeless family, the young abandoned to their own devices, the old who are discarded: all are encompassed in the hope Mary proclaims"*.

Mary articulates an end to economic structures that are exploitative and unjust. She speaks of a time when all will enjoy the good things given by God. Mary's Magnificat clearly speaks to the hopes and dreams of each and every person who has ever envisioned a world in which the teachings of Mary's child Jesus are embraced and embodied so that humanity can live into Mary's hope-filled dream of life without fear, filled with the LOVE which IS DIVINITY.

On the fourth Sunday of Advent let us as followers of the Jesus be willing to sing and embrace the Magnificat.

And in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *‘the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings....This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols’.*

In it Mary declares: *“He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones and raised up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with nothing” (Luke 1:51-53).*

NOW the Magnificat might not feel like good news to me, exactly, as someone who is neither hungry nor poor. But Mary and her song are good news for my neighbours, both locally and globally, who continue to be crushed under a world that thrives on exploitation and injustice.

And as someone who takes the Bible seriously, I know that loving my neighbour is the Number ONE way I can love God in our world. Mary must become the focal point for how we, and many other Christians, celebrate Christmas while living in the reality of waiting for true justice to come.

Mary has helped me understand the true magnificence of how much God cares about our political, economic and social realities. Mary has reminded me how much God loves those on the margins, those who struggle, those who have been exploited, those who are abused and abandoned, those asylum seekers who continues to face an uncertain future at the hands of a cruel and inhospitable government. Mary’s Magnificat is good news to them. PLEASE, please my dear friends and pilgrims on the journey if you have a nativity scene in your house make sure Mary doesn’t just remain a silent member of the nativity, or a holy womb for God, or an obedient and compliant girl.

The invitation today is, like Mary and later on through Jesus, to see this unexpected beauty

in the lives of those on the margins, for it is there that we truly experience the LOVE of the God who came down to earth, put on skin and lived as one of us.

AND THIS MORNING WE ARE ALL INVITED TO HIS TABLE and as we come, we are reminded again that Jesus came to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable.

Amen.