

ISAIAH 35:1-10

LUKE 1:46b-55

JAMES 5:7-10

MATTHEW 11:2-11

Third Sunday of Advent; Joy (Gaudete)

December 11, 2022; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Magnifying a Magnificent Magnificence!

It is the stuff of which poetry and prose is made! Echoing or mirroring the ancient song of a barren woman named Hannah from the Hebrew Bible (I Samuel 1:20), a grateful recipient of divine care who discovered her miraculous pregnancy, one of many recorded in the Bible, along with the song of Deborah, rejoicing in her divinely blessed murder of Sisera while he slept, with glee, I suppose, stabbing him in the forehead with a tent peg, *The Magnificat* makes for one glorious monologue. Mary's Song is a soliloquy of thanks and praise, forming the eloquent words found in what is considered music to the ears for a reason, because these words are singable, lyrics easily put to the harmonies of hymnody! You just sang it! *The Magnificat*, a Latin term meaning "magnify," loosely translated in some versions as "glorify," is a beautifully crafted linguistic masterpiece, a literary creation befitting the magic, metaphor, miracle, myth, and mystery all woven into these Advent-leading-to-Christmas narratives, mysterious texts subtly revealing the amazement of a host of fantastic and fanciful events centering on the pinnacle moment describing in detail what was perceived as a royal, a holy, birth, even described as a virginal conception.

The problem with Mary's singing, in what is a wonderfully, most optimistic, expressively promising text, is that if we get caught up in the lofty and lovely allegories carefully and creatively framing words attributed to Mary but were never nowhere near being on her limited radar, we will never get or will lose the point in this dreamy vision for humanity. This careful level of articulation never would never have come close to a young, approximately twelve-year-old barely adolescent girl. This aria makes for the height of a fine literary composition! Even

so, for our homiletical purposes today we will give Mary credit, playing a game we often do when reading the Bible of let's pretend, giving this soloist her due because these words were purposefully, intentionally, by design, placed in the singer's mouth by the Matthean writer! Matthew had a reason! When we fail to get the symbolism, we are quick to overlook the radical message this brilliant Matthean Gospel writer was seeking to softly and subtly and boldly and graphically convey to an audience under constant assault, victimized as a vulnerably compromised people enduring Roman occupation. Yes, as with every text in the Christian scriptures, the children of Israel were living under the thumb, existing under an autocratic and authoritarian rule that indeed was a daily grind. Yes, these now ancient Israelis read these words in a far different way than we do, even as we politely place them within our liturgies and read them against the warm glow of candlelight. These were powerful words supporting if not agitating, encouraging, urging insurrection, advocating a seditious response, a reactionary uprising, a blatant overthrow against those in power. Standing alone in the larger narrative, *The Magnificat* is a scandalous, subversive, document! And yes, wait for it, these are hospitably welcoming and inclusive words to those who live on the fringes of society, the disenfranchised and marginalized at risk citizens. These are hospitable words, yes making *The Magnificat* a biblical hospitality text. Magnifique! Magnifico! Magnificent! As always, there is always more lurking behind the contextual curtain when we peel back the layers of the textual onion of the Bible, to mix a couple of helpful images. There is always more to a text than the text. There is always a message lurking between the lines!

The world into which Matthew composed his Gospel, as he offered his unique version of the tradition of events related to the Jesus story, the Gospel writer framed his musings against the backdrop of a world in disarray, caught in the unyielding vortex of perpetual turmoil, writing in the aftermath of another catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. Yes, Israel's temporary demise had happened once more, this time, oh say about 650 years after the first assault on this land of promise. This time the insult was perpetrated by Romans, blood on their hands, who feared even the slightest threat of any real or imagined adversary. The Romans were one in a long line of sworn enemies of a people seemingly endlessly dispossessed! Yes, it was like they were caught in the proverbial gerbil wheel, reliving all over again the Babylonian captivity of 587

BCE, a horrific déjà vu experience for a people who seemed prone to be forced between the proverbial rock and a hard place, sadly drawn to the flame like a suicidal moth, like a fly to the Venus flytrap, pick your favorite bug analogy! Yes, history, as it always seems to do, just kept repeating itself! Matthew was written just after 70 CE, after the second fall, and so the Israelite people, traditional Jews, and followers of Jesus alike, were people living the aftermath, survivors living on the dark side of the worst, most horrific, devastation, the crucible of a most traumatizing experience. And so, into the vortex of a world gone mad, a Roman juggernaut devoid of any societal ethics, no moral standards whatsoever, overrun with all the atrocities and disastrous sights imaginable, disturbing visuals on all sides, everywhere you looked, here comes Matthew's musings conveyed through this provocative servant of God named Mary, including the author's rallying cry, verbal salvos that appear as the most benign of humble blessings and promises. What meets the eye is not really what we read! No, not at all!

Writing for this week's edition of *Connections*, the newsletter for the Alliance of Baptists, Nancy Hastings Sehested, in an article titled "Singing Our Song with Mary," declares that "Mary's Magnificat is dangerous. Be prepared. If you dare pray this song within earshot of the powerful, you may jumpstart some trouble. Mary's song was banned from singing" (during Evensong) in the 1800s by William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, refusing its allowance in churches in India during British rule. It was banned in Argentina in the 1970s by the military junta. In the plaza of the capital city, the Mothers of the Disappeared wrote the prayer on placards as a rallying cry for non-violent resistance . . ." One defensive commentator had the nerve to suggest that Mary's prophetic declaration was prohibited because "if taken out of context" it "would cause nothing but trouble." To which context, pray tell, was this biblically bland and timidly troubled, worrier referring? I guess this individual meant to hide the meaning, cover up any controversy, intending to keep the raw and rough edges at arm's length. When used appropriately and honestly, the Bible is a book of agitation, a political diatribe! As the saying goes, the bible "comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable! We do a disservice to any biblical text when we attempt to keep its message under wraps, allowing the narrative to continue to speak as it once did, the painful and poignant stings nicely floating in the rearview mirror of

history, passive preachers and teachers either avoiding or ignoring, never willfully bothering to comment on any contemporary concerns. There are far too many insecure Bible readers who wish to rewrite, to sanitize or sterilize, to devotionally reinterpret the Bible, making the good book what they want it to be, to say what they want it to say! Ironically, with all the book bans today, the equivalent of book burnings, the Bible should be at the top of the list based on its “R” and “X” rated content. But the same people who would ban certain books and swear to believe the Bible “cover to cover” have probably never read all of it! But I digress; I often do! ***The Magnificat* was what it was and is what it is! This narrative continues to convey an essentially important, a vital, word to our contemporary ears.** Feminist theologian Jane Schaberg notes, “Commentators have often remarked on the seeming inappropriateness of the tone and sentiments expressed in *Magnificat*, as attributed to Mary. That is, they are thought to be inappropriate in the mouth of a young girl who has just miraculously conceived the Messiah and received the glorious promises of his destiny.” In other words, this accidental, erstwhile, preacher, prophet extraordinaire, should have known her place, that she, like all young girls and older women that she was to keep quiet, demur and polite, prim and proper and surely a bit prude, knowing her newfound predicament, all negative adjectives in play, knowing her place that was, and remains for many today, the place solely reserved, carefully carved out, traditionally relegated, for women, yes, barefoot and pregnant and somewhere within close proximity to a kitchen! Ladies, can I get an “Amen?” You laugh! I knew you would! As Helen Reddy once sang, “I am woman!” A woman’s place is in the pulpit, hanging out with the powerful, and they should be delightfully found in every place where, ironically speaking, men have always been, shall we say, comfortably at home, doing their thing! This baseline demand is no longer up for debate, nor should it be! Never should have been! Case closed! Thanks be to God! It is a matter of biblical and thus human hospitality! Once again, I digress; I often do! Silence was not an option for Mary, this beautiful bearer of wonderfully unsettling news! Susan Connelly observes, “unfortunately, we often present a very young picture of Mary in the Church. Art, music and homilies,” not this one, “more often than not emphasize her submission to God’s will as passivity, her obedience as subjection, and her ‘yes’ to God as something sweet, small and feeble.” How nice! The fact that a woman dared to speak in a narrative of such import, in a day when women were without voice and automatically by

virtue of gender subjugated to an inferior status, is an indicator that the writer was making a not-so-subtle statement in this poetic vernacular, language artfully veiling a threat to colonial, imperial, Rome!

Magnificat accomplished two radical things, and all at the same time! First, Mary's ballad fired a shot right over the bow of the oppressors, the imperial Roman authorities, specifically a salvo hurled at Herod Antipas, son of the Great, and his boss-man, an obedient sycophant, suck-up to Caesar Augustus, the dictator in command, the rotten ruler in power. Mary's song was a clear revoke of the prevailing *Pax Romana*, the imaginary peace that kept society somewhat at peace and under control, when in fact the Romans had coercively and violently seized control of Jerusalem! Second, Mary's refrain promised a day of social justice to come, a day when the powerful would be impeached and scattered like the wind, a day that would bring down the proud and see the lowly uplifted, one going up, the other coming down, and all those who were empty would be filled with good things, the hungry fed as if from a gigantic buffet table with a smorgasbord of delicious entrées. Again, for emphasis, the rich would go away empty handed! See the story of Lazarus and Divies for an eternal glimpse of this kind of justice, the great reversals in the Gospels fully on display, clearly at work! All these promises would be fulfilled to honor those made to Abraham long, long ago, promises made and kept to the descendants of the great patriarch. These were not the wild musings of a young girl easily accused of gossip, idle unbridled chatter, no, she was the victim of rumor and innuendo. Rather, these were the marked words of a prophet, a term not usually associated with Mary the mother of Jesus, her youth and innocence, her purported, biblically debatable, virginity, getting in the way of her being taken seriously by readers throughout history who benignly interpret her story verbatim, according to the legend.

Let me state clearly from the pulpit, the Doctrine of the Virgin Birth was created by an all-male clerical hierarchy to be used as an ecclesial glass ceiling, joining with Original Sin in the mythic Edenic Fall, forever blaming Eve, to keep women in an inferior, second-class place, an ungodly subjugated status from which they could not escape. No woman can match Mary's rarest, no impossible feat! Mary is often conveniently reduced to a vessel, the proverbial handmaid of the Lord,

and her use is limited to her procreative abilities. Many who retell her story unwittingly seek “to put her away privately” just as Mary’s betrothed once did when he found out about her inconvenient truth, what was a most untenable situation, a sticky wicket indeed. Yes, the church has put Mary on the shelf like a porcelain China doll, just like the statue we see at every turn! Mary is shortchanged, given the proverbial short end of the stick, nowhere near given her due. Mary was an active participant in God’s universal design, however that came to pass in the birth of Jesus, not a passive receptacle, not an innocent bystander, her womb on loan to the Holy Spirit for biblically asserted divine purposes. Mary has been purified, sanitized, sanctified, and sainted until she is no longer recognizable as a real, flesh and blood human being, you know, kind of like her son! Magnificat seeks and destroys all deeply ingrained assumptions, attacking every vestige of mythology attached to Mary’s person, removing the veils that mask who she really and truly was as a purveyor of prophecy who boldly, courageously, risked it all to speak truth to power, to stand up to the brutality and bully pulpit of those whose boot was on the necks of the Israelite people, a people weary, sick and tired of indenture, the bondage of captivity that dehumanizes the best intentions for the human creature. Mary should be found among the line of the great prophets of old, including the subversive Deborah and Judith, mirroring the scandalous women named in Matthew’s genealogy, yes, Jesus’ blood line, Bathsheba, Rahab, Ruth, and Tamar, biblical heroines all! Yes, Mary, just like her soon to be cousin-in-law John, and all the prophets, men and women who have gone before, a great lineage, is a prophet extraordinaire and her prophecy continues to speak a radically relevant word in our day and time, a timeless message calling for equity among all God’s people and all people of people of God, no matter!

Mary’s Magnificat is a reminder, that at its core, including its most frenetic, schizophrenic, promise, capsuling a counter intuitive narrative, that by and large the Bible is a book about justice, a social justice primer, giving the basics as well as an advanced perspective. Whatever can be said about Jesus, it must be stated clearly that he was an advocate for social justice, a passion that was at the core of his being. All his preaching and teaching, the content of his mission and ministry, was completely, totally, centered on bringing justice, social justice, to those who knew it not, who did not know of it in the least, a direct word to those

who did not have access to it. Mary's Magnificat boldly and bravely declares for eternity that the world according to God and God's Gospel in Christ, is a world consumed by a raging fire of social justice. No wonder John the Baptist apparently failed to get the memo as he proclaimed the coming of his cousin, prejudicially stereotyping the man of peace as the coming of one bringing judgment and damnation, a condemning fire and brimstone with a winnowing fork coming to stick it to us all. John's Jesus was looking for a fight, looking to pick at the human scab, seeking high and low, diligently, desperately, for the backslidden, to any who failed to meet the litmus test of God's grace that he might mete out some vengeful retribution. That, my friends, was never Jesus, the human one, the man from Nazareth! Jesus was all about grace, and the irony of grace is that it is God's grace that is most gracious, an extra helping, to those who have failed to meet the divine measure that is the hopeful expectation for all humanity. The list of these persons would include the likes of you and me! We do not earn it! We may not even deserve it! Yes, so many advertisements on television tell us what we deserve, whether it is a lizard telling us to save, a Jacuzzi hawker telling us that we deserve the bath or shower of our dreams, Spectrum, and oh, so many more! No, everyone, every person on earth, at a minimum deserves justice, social justice, and that is the final word from Mary! Yes, the good news is that there is grace abounding for sinners and all of us fit that category at least on occasion. Yes, even so, we know that we are always and everywhere with everyone, including God, held to account, responsible for our actions! The good news on this day and from Mary's lips to our ears is that there is grace and grace abounding. So let's agree to give John the baptizing one a rest today, shall we? Oh, the joy! Feel the joy! Gaudete! Rejoice! And let Mary's Song, her *Magnificat*, sing! Let her words lead the way!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and calls us to make Magnificat a reality in our lives and in our world! Amen and amen.

