

Fourth Sunday of Advent; Love

MICAH 5:2-5a

LUKE 1:46b-55

HEBREWS 10:5-10

LUKE 1:39-45

December 22, 2024

*A Song to End All Songs!*

**Magnificat! The Song of Mary! “My soul magnifies the Lord!”** As with many familiar and popular biblical texts, when we come to Mary’s song, a soliloquy that follows a rich biblical tradition, though unique in its own way, we tend to benignly skip through it, passively reading the text or happily singing a delightfully uplifting rendition of the song as we did today as a part of our Advent liturgy. Despite honoring the text by including it as a part of worship in this traditional way, meanings can get lost in the shuffle, lost in the sauce of the service as we keep pace with the order of the liturgy as we engage each tasty morsel as we repeat ancient rituals that have been observed and followed for more than two thousand years. There is a natural tendency this time of year, that even in the midst of the sacred, our focus can get a bit blurred, our attention somewhat distracted, somewhat divided, getting drowned out against the cacophony of noises our festive worship can produce during this holy holiday season. During Advent and Christmas, it is as if our senses are indeed in sensory overload, all the sights and sounds vying for our attention as if in they are in competition. Adhering to our usual liturgical patterns, following a routine with which we have become more than comfortably accustomed through the years, this ancient song attributed to Mary then becomes way too easy to overlook, to gloss over, to even dismiss or disregard, as we simply miss the radical prophetic pronouncement lying at the core of its content. Frankly, we are not even remotely aware that we are somehow managing to avoid or ignore this profound prophecy presumably once proclaimed by the expectant mother of Jesus. Familiarity may not always breed contempt, but in the case of certain literary genres, *Magnificat* being an excellent example, too much familiarity certainly can take the edge right off all things meant to be edgy, can subtly remove the intended meaning in what, quickly or slowly, became a public acclamation designed to capture the imagination and the attention. If not obscurely lost on the opinion page at the back of a newspaper, the Song of Mary would have been frontpage news, grabbing all the headlines in the Jerusalem Times if there had been one. “Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Young girl claiming to be a pregnant virgin, fully showing a baby bump, surprisingly prophecies a word for the ages, a word for the huddled masses!” The Song of Mary, *Magnificat*, as it is poetically called, invoking the beauty of the Latin, is indeed magnificent, though magnificent is not its definition or its translation, not at all what the word describing this canticle ascribed to Mary means, not even close. As noted earlier, *Magnificat* is translated as “my soul magnifies the Lord!” Even so, *Magnificat* indeed fits the bill as a magnificent text, play on words intended! Despite its calm demeanor, if we can use that image to describe literature, Mary’s proclamation is a narrative that would have been received as eyepopping, jaw dropping, heard and/or read as scandalous, even subversive, shocking to anyone who was exposed to this poetic prose back in the day. The song would have been especially disturbing to all who were in power once upon a time, no matter whether their presumed authority rested among Israelite religious insiders or outside forces, you know, those annoying occupying Roman interlopers who governed Israel with an iron fist. These cruel Roman interlopers had given themselves permission as if by divine fiat, Caesar considered divine, Son of God, in his part of the world. Th only thing Rome brought to a now barren table was disruption, destruction and downfall, imposing their iron will on a people whose beliefs and practices they merely tolerated for political capital. **In some ways, in many ways, the Song of Mary is a song to end all songs!**

**Think about it, the Song of Mary is a song of liberation, an anthem which became a theme for the liberation movement, daringly called “one of the most revolutionary documents in all literature, containing three separate revolutions”: moral, social, and economic, and all at the same time. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a part of the Nazi resistance movement and the subject of a recent movie that has brought this significant theologian to light, proclaimed that “The Song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once 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 is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here . . . This song . . . is a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary’s mouth.” I would say that the Song of Mary directly confronts the arrogance, the narcissistic hubris laden with any and everyone who fall within the Apostle Paul’s broad definition of the “powers and principalities” of this world. Believe it, or not, the public recitation of the Song of Mary, yes, a part of the Bible, was once banned in Guatemala in the 1980s. There was a day when the British government even attempted to silence the singing of this great refrain at Evensong, of all times and places. The *Magnificat* was banned in Argentina back in the day because it was invoked as a call for nonviolent resistance to the ruling military junta in the mid-1970s. This text is not and never has been for the faint of heart, not the stuff of hallmark cards, polite pleasantries, or benign Christmas or Hanukkah greetings.**

Part of the challenge to reading *Magnificat* is that the one to whom this literary masterpiece is credited, a young pregnant girl traditionally called the Blessed Virgin Mary, is usually presented as demur, perhaps a picture of a quintessential southern belle, portrayed in art just like her son, the pale pair dutifully exhibited as rather weak and anemic, uncomfortably pensive, figures, their expressions lacking any trace of authentic human experience, artistic license gone awry forever. Mary is shown to be a portrait of perfect politeness, modestly exuding what we might call a faux spiritual pose, Mary looking rather pathetic, most pitiful, framed under the ambience of a subtle and shadowy veil of the dimmest light, her tepid smile striking a look of fragility. Mary strikes a pose portraying traits indicating a frail young woman presented to the world as passive, who is either gifted or cursed with a confusing conception not of her choosing, yes, all dependent on personal perspective. Mary is pigeonholed, stereotyped, perhaps becoming a blueprint or an archetype symbolic of all women conceived in this culture, or as Susan Connelly observes, as “something sweet, small, and feeble.” After all, we all know a woman’s place back in the day, completely helpless, totally voiceless, submissive and subservient, always dependent on a man for her sustenance and her very survival. And yet, this bold song belies that historically off-putting portrayal of Mary, the lyrics following in the lyrical tradition of strong women in the Bible who echo a confidently resounding faith, their tenacity becoming the stuff of legend, women like Hannah and Deborah and Judith who were each credited with singing a similar triumphant song in their victoriously heroic escapades. Mary is anything but the caricature assumed by the misogynistic patriarchy that framed the theology and subsequent doctrinal creeds forcing a variety of litmus test defining the narrowing parameters of the early Church. Yes, women sing! Men, not so much! To get to the heart of this song attributed to Mary, a girl of about twelve years old who probably could not have and thus did not utter these poetic words, we must peel back the proverbial onion to see what was there at the time this text was written, and thus what now remains as a living testimony in perpetuity. Only when we get to the root of the original intent can we even begin to uncover the meaning of the content, including the explicitly implied depths of warning, ironic oxymoron intended, charges that were being laid at the feet of those who had mercilessly taken charge, had seized control, and were hellbent on keeping order by wielding an immensely cruel domination, brute force reinforcing a false sense of security driving their self-imposed rule, their empowerment gained at the edge of a sword.

**In all candor, this narrative could easily be called “The Song of Luke,” because, of course, it was Luke who wrote these words, carefully crafting this language against the backdrop of all the turmoil surrounding Israel at the time this Lukan historian wrote this Gospel somewhere in the neighborhood of 80-90 CE. While I have not seen the movie adaptation of *Wicked*, nor have I seen the Broadway play version, I am aware of the buzz surrounding**

this musical, that *Wicked* is all the rage in theatres during this holiday season. I try and stay semi-current! I mention *Wicked* because *Magnificat*, this Song of Mary, appears in the middle of the Lukan birth narratives just like a selection, in this case a solo, in a musical, almost randomly appearing in the middle of an ongoing monologue, yes, abruptly interrupting the dialogue. In fact, Christmas pageants have long shown that the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke beautifully lend themselves to this very kind of musical production. **Think *Westside Story* as another classic example.** As Richard B. Vinson notes, “This episode always puts me in mind of *The Sound of Music*, where the movie characters are forever breaking into song; not an opera, where everything is sung, but a musical, where the plot is carried sometimes by conversation and sometimes by songs. In one scene Maria goes to see the head of her convent for advice, and is treated to ‘Climb Every Mountain.’ In another, the von Trapp children are performing the good-night song, and at the end, the crowd below echoes, in perfect harmony, the ‘good-bye’ of the children. Marvelous, unforgettable entertainment; not very much like real life. In our scene, the infant John leaps for joy in Elizabeth’s womb; Elizabeth, filled with the Spirit, offers prophetic blessing and oracles that may be poetry; and then Mary tilts back her head and belts out a Handelian recitative whose libretto is drawn from all over the Old Testament. . .” Vinson goes on to say, “This is high drama, done for theological effect . . . realism is not the point, so we will take no time looking for explanations for how Mary could have memorized so much Torah or for what this story says about the social location of two women.” After all, Vincent again, according to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (LXX), the song Mary sings brings to mind, recalling images from Abraham, from Moses and all the prophets, her soliloquy rattling off “themes of God’s salvation: mercy to the poor, judgment on the wealthy; honor to the humble, confusion to the proud; faithfulness to the promises made to Israel through Abraham and the patriarchs.” **In terms of singing, I mean, we got all kinds of singing interruptus going on in this story. In fact, knowing my love for music and frequently citing pop songs in my sermons, I have often thought about breaking out in song in the middle of a sermon, singing whatever song has strangely entered my mind. And, then I think better of it (insert song here)! Yes, kind of like that! Thank you Lori for doing the honors, this delightfully choreographed fanfare falling under the vague category of other duties as assigned! Indeed, the intentional placement of this song is what seems to have been the literary methodology driving the Lukan infancy narrative as this story was composed and as we now read this birth story in the Gospel of Luke. Timing is everything!**

But considering the more serious side to this song, the implications emanating from these seemingly poetically polite words attributed to Mary are really not so subtle. Indeed, these pronouncements amount to ominous warnings that can be taken either as not-so-veiled threats masquerading as promises or promises masquerading as not-so-veiled threats. Either way, these words sent shockwaves, portending some serious signals to the proud and the powerful that the world order was about to change, if in fact that wonderfully amazing kind of disturbance had not already done so, an evolution already begun. This loaded vocabulary, full of subversive inuendo, would have sent a chill up the spine, cutting to the bone, right down to the quick! To invoke some imagery by the great theologian Paul Tillich, the Song of Mary would meet or exceed his qualifications as an excellent example of the shaking of the foundations. It will not surprise you to hear that the Song of Mary constitutes one of the many hospitality texts in the Bible, at least as far as I can theorize. The Song of Mary unapologetically, boldly, advocates for social justice, offering a sobering word, the subtlest but clearest possible language declaring that a new day dawning was on the horizon that would place the needs of the poor above the proud and powerful, any monarchically minded authoritarian dictator who met that criteria, radically altering the pecking order of the world, rearranging the rungs on the ladder, status inverted, the great suddenly the last and least, and vice versa. The Song of Mary sent more than a signal but was a crystal-clear message promising to bring down the mighty from their thrones. Mary’s song was a distinct and direct message to Herod the puppet, a message to the ruling emperor, that would be Octavius called Caesar Augustus, and every would be despot who would follow, legion as they have always been, right up until these very moments, a guarantee that their days were numbered, that they had a short shelf life, an expiration date coming like a freight train, like a speeding bullet, each rogue ruler a target. The Song of Mary promises that a new rule and reign was coming, buffeted by the gracious love of a God of mercy and peace would be the new world order. Promises! Promises!

Citing the wisdom of Vincent once more, this intuitively insightful commentator offers a sobering take on a narrative that is indeed indicting in so many ways to all of us who live the good life and know it, often at the expense of others, for the most part unintentionally oppressing the less fortunate, stifling the potential upward mobility of the down-and-out who are often so easily dismissed just in the same way that Mary could have been conveniently put away privately, forgotten by society. How easy it is to forget those who live on the fringes, random victims despite their rights as citizens, those who are disenfranchised and marginalized in all the ways that our societal constructs not only allow but generate, shall we perversely say prosper, proliferating in all the many abusive ways that are, unfortunately, inherently endemic within every economic structure. Vincent notes, in the Song of Mary, “Here we begin the theme of God’s choice of the poor, and Jesus’ salvation of the poor and condemnation of the rich. No educated American like me, sitting at a word processor (how old school) in an air-conditioned office, has the full experience of either, for I have never been poor in the way that Mary means, and so far God has not crushed me for my wealth as she predicts. Luke’s Gospel, Mary’s God, and Mary’s Son will not prove easy for me or for my readers, or else we are not paying attention. This year, (he wrote this for publication in 2008) Americans gave less to the poor than the year before; in fact, we Americans spent more on dog food, or chewing gum, or many other single convenience items, than we gave to the poor. We must face the truth: we are the bad guys in this story we’re reading. If God chooses the poor, we are doomed. If God scatters the rich, the proud, and the powerful, we will be dust in the wind . . . Is the Magnificat good news? That will inevitably depend on how we structure our lives in response to the calls of Mary, John the Baptist, and Jesus to do right by the poor. . .” I could not have said any of that any better myself and so I did not!

**And so, as we read and as we sing the Song of Mary once again, let me invoke the words of a book title by the late Marcus Borg, let us read and sing these words again as if for the first time. Hopefully, if we are able to read and sing this manifesto in this fresh manner, interpreting through new lenses, perhaps understanding in a totally new way, we will fully comprehend the radicality of the message, graciously receiving the stark imagery as it was intended when this narrative was first written, this beautiful song immediately becoming the expectation for every person in every generation since this song was composed, everyone who begins to fully experience the depth and breadth of these words. In some ways, in many ways in fact, the Song of Mary, this profound soliloquy, stings like a bee even more so than the accompanying prophetic musings once cried out in the wilderness by John the Baptist, son of Elizabeth, a miraculously pregnant woman in her own right who sings her own unique song in the Gospel of Luke. Once again, as it always is, every time, all the time, the call of the gospel is clear, a clarion call to social justice, a mandate that being a follower of Jesus demands our attentiveness to the last and the least, that we be the cups of cold water in a hurting world. No matter the text, the story, yes, the song, remains the same, the calling consistent with what it means to embrace all that the Christ Child would bring, then and now. In some ways, in many ways, the Song of Mary is a song to end all songs!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and gives us a song to sing, a song with a refrain that repeats the sounding joy of the old, old story, again and again and again! Amen and amen!**