

Throughout Advent we've been looking for God's presence in dark and light and shadow.

And today, as we become privy first to Gabriel's encounter with Mary, and then to Mary's encounter with Elizabeth, Luke shows us how the whole gospel story he tells begins within the dark and hallowed wombs of these two women.

Instead of placing Elizabeth and Miriam on the perimeter in supportive roles in the story he tells, Luke brings them front and center in a drama his audience might expect to be dominated by men.

It's just one of the surprises in store for us in the opening pages of his gospel.

In telling the story of Jesus' birth, Luke continuously puts opposites together.

He begins his narrative by laying out the political context in which this story is set – Herod rules Judea, Quirinius governs Assyria, and Augustus rules Rome.

These are the POWERS-THAT-BE, the SHAKERS AND MOVERS, the ones who generate the PAGE ONE HEADLINES of the day, the kind of men we'd expect to have leading roles.

But it quickly becomes clear that this story does not belong them, nor is it about them.

They may give their orders, make their decrees and record their versions of history, but a much greater power is stirring things up in the world; a below-the-radar sub-version is being written here.

So, soon after laying out the political context Luke leaves the public realm to take us inside the personal lives of an elderly couple living in the shadow of an unfulfilled dream... the dream that they may one day have a child.

THIS, says Luke, is where the real action begins.

And if we start hearing echoes in the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, echoes that take us back to another elderly couple, Abraham and Sarah, two millennia before, then Luke has done his job. (Remember God calling Abram outside the tent that night? Remember him looking up at the stars?)

YES, Luke says, THE STORY I'M TELLING IS A CONTINUATION OF THAT OLDER STORY, AND HAS ITS ROOTS THERE.

And so the two opposites—public figures and personal hopes are brought together.

Against all odds Elizabeth DOES conceive, of course, just as the Messenger Gabriel promised. And so the story sets in motion the notion that the God who makes impossible things possible is afoot in the world once again.

What Luke does next adds yet another layer of surprise to the story.

In a world in which TIME is measured by the military victories of conquering armies, Luke offers a different measuring stick: **the gestational period of life growing in one woman's womb.**

And so our gospel reading today begins with the words: IN THE SIXTH MONTH, and we can add in parentheses: OF ELIZABETH'S PREGNANCY...

Who does that? Who, in a time dominated by the MACHINATIONS OF EMPIRE, uses the trimesters of pregnancy as the measuring stick for telling a story? Well, Luke does.

And now, for the first time, we meet Mary and are introduced to another set of opposites: A teenage girl too young to be a mother, is paired with Elizabeth, too old to be a mother.

GREETINGS FAVORED ONE, THE LORD IS WITH YOU, says the Messenger, and it dawns on Mary that something extraordinary is happening.

After Gabriel visitation, Mary, we can imagine, hardly slept a wink. And by morning, she knows what she must do—that she must go to see her kinswoman...

For Elizabeth, too, was experiencing sweeping changes in her life—or so the Stranger said. How was she coping with it all? Mary would find out. She would go to her.

When Mary arrives at Elizabeth home, they stretch out their arms to embrace each other over Elizabeth's swollen belly.

- One woman, past her prime, her womb after years of emptiness, suddenly fruitful.
- The other, young and newly pregnant, with Gabriel's voice still ringing in her ears...

And in that moment, with that confirmation, a window opens for Mary, and she can see farther and deeper than she ever has before.

MY SOUL MAGNIFIES THE LORD AND MY SPIRIT REJOICES IN GOD MY SAVIOR, she sings, FOR GOD HAS LOOKED WITH FAVOR ON THE LOWLINESS OF HIS SERVANT. SURELY, FROM NOW ON ALL GENERATIONS WILL CALL ME BLESSED..."

This story, Mary now knows, is deeply personal—it's her body, after all, that's been called into service—but there's more than her story at stake.

As Mary starts to sing, her lyric is intensely personal, but it doesn't stay there; it moves beyond the personal to encompass the hope of all those who feel lost, forsaken, downtrodden; all those who are hungry, lonely, and wondering if God hasn't forgotten them altogether.

GOD HAS SHOWN STRENGTH WITH HIS ARM, SCATTERING THE PROUD,
DE-THRONGING THE POWERFUL, LIFTING UP THE LOWLY. FILLING THE
HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS AND SENDING THE RICH AWAY EMPTY.

The reign of God—she sees it clearly now—the reign of God calls into question, reshapes and reprioritizes everything that the world considers important.

The Magnificat, Mary's song, has a long history in the church. And one must wonder how, in the many centuries when the Church was allied with Empire, served the empire, and even, at times, proclaimed and enforced its own notion of Empire—one must wonder how the lyrics of Mary's song were understood.

“Unfortunately,” writes Sister Susan Connelly, “we often present a very wrong picture of Mary in the Church. Art, music and homilies 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. **Nothing could be further from the truth.**”¹

The fact is, the Magnificat (Mary's song) is... a subversive song, so much so that at different times in recent centuries governments have banned its public recitation... and sought to prevent the spirit of reversal it conveys from taking root in the lives of the downtrodden.²

“The song of Mary,” preached Dietrich Bonhoeffer, during the rising tide of Nazism, “is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung...

This song,” he says, “has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead 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.”³

¹ *The Magnificat as Social Document*. Susan Connelly <http://compassreview.org/summer14/3.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ Advent Sermons, 1933, from *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Fortress, 2021) Cited in the Nov/Dec 2021 issue of *Gather* magazine.

What so inspires Mary? What inspires her is that she, a lowly peasant girl from the off-the-grid hamlet of Nazareth, SHE HAS BEEN SEEN. God's declaration through Gabriel has brought her from the margins to the center.

And because she has been SEEN and valued (by GOD no less!) SHE CAN SEE—more clearly and further than ever before—that GOD is at work in the unexpected, unconventional, upset life hers is about to become. And in her singing she invites US to SEE.

“The Magnificat is a whole world-view,” concludes Sister Connelly. “It is the perception of a person who is thoroughly steeped in God, and if its message escapes us, or fails to ignite us, then that says a great deal about us.”⁴

“In White North American churches, when the Magnificat is read during Advent and little girls kneel sweetly at the crèche during pageants, it is difficult to conjure Miriam of Nazareth, revolutionary forerunner... of a Messiah born into the economic disparities and class conflicts of an occupied land.

The Virgin Mary of sentimental Christianity we know well; Miriam the Jewish peasant who gives voice to her people's desperate longing for liberation—not so much.

[Yet] from the very beginning, the story of Jesus [in Luke] is a story which shatters old patterns and gives us a new way of looking at the world and God's activity in it.”⁵

Mary's response to Gabriel's message - LET IT BE WITH ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD – coupled with her song of joy in Elizabeth's presence show us the Divine choreography that moves from deeply personal territory to the larger arena of society and world. A move, a dance, we, too, are invited to make.

Mary's voice invites us to join the singing and to proclaim with the choices we make and the lives we live that we, too, are ready to put our trust in the One who disrupts old patterns in order to make all things new.

May it be so! Amen.

⁴ Susan Connelly, *Compass Review*, Summer 2014.

⁵ Debra Dean Murphy, *Imagining a New Political Economy with Miriam of Nazareth*. *Christian Century*, December 1, 2021
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/imagining-new-political-economy-miriam-nazareth>

In the time of Elizabeth and Mary, the value of women depended almost entirely upon the men in their lives; both the men they married and the male children they brought into the world.

In a strongly patriarchal culture, a woman's primary opportunity to contribute to the status of her household came through the bearing of sons.

In many parts of our world, the same is true today.

But the value and status of Mary and Elizabeth, Luke tells us, does not derive from their relationships to men but from their belief in the promises of God.

They trust that God's promises can be counted on and they respond:

LET IT BE WITH ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD.

They believe that God's plan for saving the world is tied up with the babies they will bear—and for all these reasons and more, Mary and Elizabeth are blessed.

As we stand here on the edge of Christmas, the story of Mary and Elizabeth asks: What promise is God working to bring to birth in my life?

How can I allow that promise—with all the potential disruptions it brings—to find a home within me, to be nourished and to grow?

The Good News which surprised Mary and Elizabeth compels us to ask, how far, how deep, how wide we can stretch our own lives to make room for God's promise within our families, our congregation, our communities, our world?

Amen.

Christian century article:

In the 1970s the government of Argentina banned all public recitations of the Magnificat after the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, whose children had been disappeared, published it as their manifesto of nonviolent resistance to the ruling military junta. Guatemala did the same in the 1980s. Generations earlier, British authorities in the East India Company excised it from evening prayer. Mary's fiery speech at the beginning of Luke's Gospel may be the appointed canticle for vespers, but it has also emboldened the colonized to resist their oppressors and the traumatized poor to claim for themselves God's preferential love.

In White North American churches, when the Magnificat is read during Advent and little girls kneel sweetly at the crèche during pageants, it is difficult to conjure Miriam of Nazareth, revolutionary forerunner (no less so than John the Baptist) of a Messiah born into the economic disparities and class conflicts of an occupied land. The Virgin Mary of sentimental Christianity we know well; Miriam the Jewish peasant who gives voice to her people's desperate longing for liberation—not so much.

In Luke's narrative, Mary makes her proclamation after she offers her fiat ("let it be done") in response to an encounter we also tend to sentimentalize, sidestepping thorny questions about power and consent and how best to interpret the scriptural trope of angelic visitation. And this unexpected pregnancy? We may idealize this part of the story most of all.⁶

Bonhoeffer, collected sermons, Advent sermon 1943 (?)

The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn every 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.

In his commentary on this canticle, Martin Luther teaches that, as in Mary's case, God desires to do great things for us too, despite our lowliness. What we need is faith, trusting in God as Mary did with "her whole life and being, mind and strength." Then we will be caught up in God's good and gracious will, which operates with kindness, mercy, justice, and righteousness. True, this always involves a reversal of values, and, Luther observes, "the mightier you are, the more must you fear; the lowlier you are, the more must you take comfort."

⁶ Debra Dean Murphy, *Imagining a new political economy with Miriam of Nazareth*. [Christian Century](#), December 15, 2021.
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/imagining-new-political-economy-miriam-nazareth>

But just as the Spirit inspires Mary's joy and fortitude, so too the Spirit imbues us every day with abundant grace to follow our own calling. The important thing to remember is that Mary had confidence in God. "Thus we too should do; that would be to sing a right Magnificat."

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/imagining-new-political-economy-miriam-nazareth>

People who are feeling unseen...

Mary is SEEN.

Mary SEES GOD in this