

Subversive Incarnation

The song we just listened to is called Mary's Song. It is a part of an Oratorio titled "Jesus, the Man, the Christ," composed by my uncle Will Ortman and performed by the Freeman community.

It joins the constellation of choral and artistic interpretations inspired by what is commonly referred to as the Magnificat, Mary's song.

I love how the setting of this piece grows with its voicings, first the angel, then Mary, then the two of them intertwined. Finally joined by the swelling chorus of jubilant angels.

And just like our text today, all women.

Having the Messiah first proclaimed by two women is only one of the many elements that make this text so provocative and subversive, coming out of a world of ancient texts dominated by men.

At 130 words, it is the most any woman gets to say in the entire New Testament.

In fact, this is the only New Testament passage that passes the Bechdel test. The Bechdel test is used to measure the representation of women in movies.

It has only 3 criteria:

That the movie contain at least *one* scene where two women, who are both named, have a conversation about something other than a man.

This is a laughably low bar to hit, and yet the percentage of Oscar nominated films between 1929 and 2017 that pass this test, is 49%.

So let's not just shake our head at antiquity, there is still a lot of work to be done.

But our text today does not start with the Magnificat, but rather with Mary, setting out with haste to the house of her relative Elizabeth, pregnant herself with John the Baptist.

The messenger, the message, and the mothers that bore them.

While John will spend his adult life in the wilderness preparing the way, it is here, John's mother, who is first filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaiming blessing upon the child that will be the Messiah, the anointed one. And the joy and wonder pours out of Mary in spontaneous song, as though the Gospel of Luke were a musical and she has stepped forward into the spotlight for a feature solo:

*“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
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.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,*

just as he promised our ancestors.”

And what a song this is. Much more than just a breathless “Thank you,
thank you thank you!”

This is an assertive proclamation!

Mary’s song carries with it the affirmations of God that ring through the Old Testament, words that have been put on the hearts and souls of God’s people for generations and generations.

God is good.

God is merciful.

And God is at work in the world.

More often than not, these Old Testament songs carried a strong socioeconomic tone and more often than not they were sung by women.

In Exodus 15, when the walls of water came crashing down on the Egyptian military forces, assuring Israel’s freedom from their oppressors, Miriam sang:

*“Sing to the Lord,
for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver
he has hurled into the sea.”*

In Judges 5, when Israel was victorious over Canaan, Deborah sang:

*“Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers!
I, even I, will sing to the Lord;
I will praise the Lord, the God of Israel, in song...
The mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai,
before the Lord, the God of Israel.”*

In 1 Samuel, when barren Hannah, who dared not even hope anymore for a child of her own is told she is pregnant with Samuel, who will be one of the earliest prophetic voices in Israel's history, she bursts into song as well:

“My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high.

*My mouth boasts over my enemies,
for I delight in your deliverance.*

*“There is no one holy like the Lord;
there is no one besides you;
There is no Rock like our God.*

Mary follows this golden thread of God's faithfulness that weaves through history, acknowledged centuries before through the words of Leviticus 26:12: *“I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.”*

But we do this story an injustice if we do not keep following that thread, which did not end with a manger, or even with a cross.

In a sermon preached on this text, Dietrich Bohnhoffer spoke these words:

For those who are great and powerful in this world, there are two places where their courage fails them, which terrify them to the very depths of their souls, and which they dearly avoid. These are the manger and the cross of Jesus Christ. No one who holds power dares to come near the manger; King Herod also did not dare. For here thrones begin to sway; the powerful fall down, and those who are high are brought low, because God is here with the lowly. Here the rich come to naught, because God is here with the poor and those who hunger. God gives there the hungry plenty to eat, but sends the rich and well-satisfied away empty. Before the maidservant Mary, before Christ's

manger, before God among the lowly, the strong find themselves falling; here they have no rights, no hope, but instead find judgment.

The powers of empire rise and fall, but the subversive hope and Truth of the Magnificat perseveres.

In 1805 missionary Henry Martyn wrote that he was alarmed to discover that the British authorities had banned the recitation of the Magnificat at Evensong in churches, apparently on account of its incendiary lyrics.

In the mid 1970s during the military junta in Argentina when over 30,000 people were “disappeared” by the government, the human rights organization “Mothers of the Disappeared” used the Magnificat to protest and call for non-violent resistance to the military junta, resulting in a government ban on the Magnificat.

In the 1980s in Guatemala, a Chicago Sun-Times article reported, “the mother of Jesus became a fulcrum for liberation theology’s social justice movement, compelling the government to ban the singing of the Magnificat as subversive.

There is debate about how official these government bans were, but there is no doubt that the passion that swelled in the heart of Mary and her sisters and brothers in faith that came before her, resonate time and time again through history. An unquenchable fire that violence and oppression has not been able to silence. If love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

First Mennonite, does this fire still burn within you this advent season?

Is God still good?

Is God still merciful?

Is God still at work in the world, swaying thrones, righting injustice, working through unexpected yet inspired vessels like you and me?

In this season where Covid fatigue has muted the holiday spirit,
where unsettling weather changes displace and disrupt,
Where politics divide and the rich get richer while the poor struggle all the
more, may the subversive fire of the Magnificat be rekindled within us,
So that we like Mary may burst forth in song and action, that the God who
creates and sustains, who was revealed to us through Jesus and through
Mary his mother, is with us still.