

The Feast of Mary, Mother of Our Lord

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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This last week I was in New Orleans at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's triennial Churchwide assembly. This gathering is the most important and influential gathering of our denomination and it sets the tone for the church in the years to come. 971 voting members gathered with about 30% who were ordained, which is a fancy word for pastors and bishops, and about 70% were lay, which is a fancy word for everyone else. Of that 13.8% were youth or young adults. It was a wonderful week to be the church! Now, when you get that many people in the room rules are often helpful to guide the conversation. The ELCA has a variety of communication tools to assist in that, including memorials, resolutions, and motions. Careful attention is given to the specific word choices when communicating the action statement or the "resolve" with these communication tools. For example, encourage, direct, request, urge, commend, affirm, acknowledge, and confess each have distinctive meanings and compel different responses. The assembly might even debate a single word to explicitly and precisely communicate its intention. While today's gospel is not explicitly a memorial, resolution, or a motion, the words chosen are intentional and important.

The gospel from Luke is Mary's song of praise, which is commonly known as the Magnificat. It's a song that Jesus' mother sings after she visits her cousin Elizabeth and receives her blessing. Mary's words are intentional, and they communicate more than one might realize at the surface. To explore this deeper meaning, let's look at verse 47. Here Mary says, "My spirit rejoices in the God of my salvation." The word for "rejoices" in Greek is aorist, and generally this means its past tense, so we'd translate it as "my spirit rejoiced." However, this word is specifically and intentionally a gnomic aorist. A gnomic aorist tense describes God's customary way of acting, and it allows the reader to infer that what has happened once will occur often.¹

Why does that matter? It matters because throughout the Magnificat Mary makes some pretty darn bold statements. Mary says that God has scattered the proud, has brought down the powerful from their thrones, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with *good* things, and sent the rich away empty handed. These are strong, even offensive, words. They were counter-cultural for her time. They are counter-cultural for our time too. For often we think that the ones with the most power, wealth, food, and things are more beloved by God. We hear, see and read people feeling "blessed by God" as though the newest purchase, or more powerful job, or more idyllic life argues God's favor. Here Mary subverted that by saying that God's favor is with the lowly. Remember, Mary was a dark-skinned, pregnant teen, confused about the baby daddy, and living in a religiously conservative small town; yet, she *still* sang that she was blessed. I imagine someone overhearing this song might have said, "Who does she think she is saying these things?"

¹ <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/12/two-prophetic-women-lord-and-leaper.html>

Well, that's what makes this gnomic aorist tense so important. What Mary sang here is a mosaic of dozens of Old Testament or Hebrew Bible expressions designed to announce that God's character is to act in a specific way over and over again.² Mary was singing the fight song of her people. Mary was singing the spirituality of the oppressed. Mary was boldly witnessing to *her* faith *and* to the faith of her people. This faith isn't something new. These were the same values, the same principles, and the same way that God had acted from the beginning.

What was new was the way Mary now experienced God's action in her life. We can see this throughout the scriptures because we know more about Mary in the New Testament than most other people. We heard her receive the announcement of Christ's birth, known as the Annunciation. We heard her play a pretty major role in Jesus' birth. She was manger-side with foreign religious seekers, whom we call the magi, and also with those scrappy, dirty shepherds. We heard that Joseph, Jesus, and her become undocumented refugees fleeing into Egypt from a violent government.

She was there when Jesus was presented at the temple, at Jesus' first miracle of turning water into wine, she stood at the foot of the cross at Jesus' crucifixion, and she waited with hope for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Mary was there. She was present in the pain and in the promise. She was a witness to God's mighty action happening not just in the past, but also in her life and into a hope-filled future where God continues God's work in the same way.

² <http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2014/12/16/10-things-i-wish-everyone-knew-about-mary-mother-of-jesus/35458>

As a congregation and a denomination we are immersed in this work as well. We, like Mary, explore how God has acted in the past through the scriptures and we chart a future that boldly witnesses to God's continual and mighty action in our midst. This week at the ELCA's churchwide assembly the church did this in a variety of ways. We witnessed a major step in Lutheran and Roman Catholic dialogues when the ELCA affirmed thirty-two statements of agreement with the Roman Catholic Church. This historically paves the way forward towards a united Christian faith, and helps us to more deeply live into the biblical and apostolic value of unity. The ELCA also gathered to affirm that, as people of God, we are flawed, which prompts continual and explicit reconciliation. Thus, the ELCA "explicitly and clearly" repudiated the "Doctrine of Discovery" that for far too long has justified mistreatment of native peoples. Instead, we affirmed the biblical principle of accompaniment and relationship.

The ELCA also called on all congregations to open their doors to welcome refugees into their buildings. Furthermore, the church approved a major strategy called AMMPARO that calls on the ELCA to accompany migrant minors with protection, advocacy, representation, and opportunities. I could go on and on about our talks of racism, Black Lives Matter, gender identity, war, the environment, investments, youth, diversity, and many more topics. I could give examples of how the church is already doing work in many areas, and how we approved new ways to share the Gospel and work for justice. A key thing to remember through it all is that these statements are not drastically new. These are only further expressions of God's mighty work in our midst. These are our ways of living out God's work in our midst in this particular time and place. It might look a little

different as we respond to specific justice issues of violence in places like Dallas and Milwaukee, or discrimination in Orlando, or hatred in our political system, or turmoil caused by environmental degradation, but in all reality it is simply the continuation of God's work in the world.

So too our congregation has been going through its own discernment. The church council has been evaluating, praying, discerning, and charting a pathway forward for us in this particular time and place. Throughout the process we've engaged the congregation and those connected with us to understand where God calls us. In the next couple weeks we will be sharing with you the results of this process. We invite you to fully engage and participate in the work of God in our midst, in this particular time and place while being rooted in what God has done and continues to do. Much of our direction is nothing new, for it's rooted in our deep tradition, values, mission, and vision. It will, however, look a little different, as our church looks a little different and the world we live in has changed. It may feel like a new song, but, much like Mary's Magnificat, it is a continuation of God's song begun long ago.

Well there it is - we heard Mary's song of action today and we are invited to explore our participation in God's story. Mary's witness and specific word choice implore us to explore and connect with God's continued work in this new time and place. Today, my friends, know that God's work continues as one of love and grace. Know that God's work continues to lift up the lowly and walk with those in need. Know that God comes to you and reminds you over and over again at that font and at this table that you are loved.

Know that God goes with you, that God is in you, and that God works through you, so that you can be empowered to share God's love with all. Amen.