

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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August 16, 2020

Today we honor the life and witness of Mary, Jesus's mother. And, one of my more memorable experiences with Mary was at The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C. In this massive Roman Catholic church, there are a variety of side chapels. And, each chapel has a different aesthetic and many of the chapels depict Mary in a different manner. There was Our Lady of Hungary Chapel with a Hungarian mosaic of Mary; there was Our Mother of Africa Chapel with a bronze statue of Mary portraying the African-American story from slavery to today; and there were chapels portraying Mary as Filipino, Mexican, Indian, Croatian, Chinese, Irish, and so many more.¹ I think that was my first foray into idea that social location influences and directs our understanding of scripture. That is, I never realized that an individual's gender, race, social class, age, ability, sexual orientation, and background could impact or even influence someone's view of Scripture. Sure, I was only an eighth grader, but I cannot believe it took me fourteen years to realize that!

¹ <https://www.nationalshrine.org/interactive-map/>

Anyway, for us to understand Mary's song in today's gospel, we also need to understand *her* social location. For, if you're anything like me, hearing the words that God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant sounds different coming from a Mary with this social location than it does from a Mary with this social location. Hearing that God has brought down the powerful from their thrones means one thing to a Mary with this social location than it does to a Mary with this social location. And a God who fills the hungry with good things sounds different from this Mary than it does to this Mary. You see, Mary's words that are disassociated with her social location become sterile, they become inaccurate, and they become what we want them to become.

If we're going to understand how Mary's song magnifies God's, movement, then we need to understand the viewpoint that Mary brings to her song. Remember, just before this song, Mary was not pregnant yet; rather, she was told that she *will* conceive (future tense) even though she was a virgin. And after this interaction, Mary consented to the pregnancy. A few days later, Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth who gave a blessing to Mary, who was now pregnant. After this greeting and blessing, Mary starts singing. And with her song, she brought her full self—that is, her social

location with her. After all, she was a fourteen-year-old girl whose childhood was ending. She was a Jewish girl steeped in the history of how God works on behalf of the oppressed. She was an unwed, teen who was now pregnant with a bastard child. And, on top of that, this child was conceived by the power of the Spirit. And, in the Bible, the Spirit is not a masculine-spirit, it could be non-gendered, but historically speaking, it is a femme Spirit. So, Mary had conceived from a femme-leaning Spirit in a patriarchal society that would usually stone an unwed mother. On top of that, Mary was living in an occupied territory under the military rule of Rome. If we were to look at Mary, she would look far less like an angelic white woman and far more like a dark-skinned teen. And, for Elizabeth to call this girl “blessed” was subversive. After all, it didn’t seem like there was anything to bless in this situation. Mary, was nothing short of a social screwup, a drain on the system, and another problem.

So, when we hear Mary sing about bringing down the powerful and sending the rich away empty—she’s talking about a jarring reversal. She’s speaking of a God whose justice doesn’t look like *our* justice. She’s speaking of a God who could care little about what is legal. She’s talking about a God who, frankly, makes *me* feel uncomfortable.

If you're anything like me, I'm feeling uncomfortable. In 2020, I'm more disoriented than ever before. I don't know how to react to the looting and the underlying realities of racism and oppression. It pains me to see it, but is that what Mary is talking about? I don't want to believe it, and I don't want to hear it. But, maybe it's closer to what it looks like when the oppressed finally begin to liberate themselves? Maybe hurt, anger, uncertainty, frustration, and messiness are how liberation begins? Maybe it's not. Maybe it's just another way that hurt people hurt people. Another way to destroy jobs, livelihoods, and neighborhoods. I really don't know.

But what I *do* know is that Mary's response to what seems like a dead-end life is one of hope. It's a hopeful response that roots itself in the Scriptures. It's a response that anchors itself in the justice songs of her people. It's a song that harkens back to the powerful female prophets like Hannah, Miriam, Deborah, and Judith. It's a song that only someone with the social location rooted in oppression, chronic maltreatment, frequently loss, and abundant hope could sing. It's a song that doesn't rely on her own hope, but rather, it's one that uses a "hope muscle" that is firmly attached to God's view of the world.

And, it makes me wonder: if all this stuff leads me to despair because those of us in places of power and privilege have forgotten what it feels like to use our “hope muscle.” Maybe we need to flex that hope. Maybe we need to warm up the attachment points of the muscle to our bones so that our work might move in alignment with God’s vision. Maybe, just maybe, we forgot what it’s like to follow God’s vision.

Today, Mary’s witness shows us that our hope muscles are connected to God’s gracious justice. And with that: Mary reminds us to look at the world through a social location of someone different than us. Mary encourages us to join in our anti-racism discussions or to attend an anti-racism training. She nudges us to glimpse life through the eyes of queer individuals, to see life through the lens of mental illness, and to imagine life with a differing physical ability. And, she does that, because Mary notices how God works to bring liberation and justice to all. Mary points to our God whose love knows no end, whose laws are different than our laws, and whose peace is beyond what we can understand. Our God has brought hope to past generations, and our God is the God of everlasting hope for you and me. Amen.