

"Mary's Magnificat"  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,  
Luke 1:39-55  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,  
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During the British rule of India, there was a song that the government decided no one was allowed to sing because the words were too dangerous. In the 1980s, Guatemala forbade the same exact song for being too revolutionary. In 1977, the country of Argentina outlawed any public display of the lyrics.

The song was Mary's Magnificat, words taken straight from the Gospel of Luke, chapter one. The song seems fairly innocuous when we hear it read in the context of our Sunday morning worship service. But though the church has been singing Mary's song throughout the centuries, it hasn't always been well received.

"The East India Company forbade its recitation during Evening prayer, lest the idea of 'putting down the mighty from their seat' be taken too literally!"<sup>1</sup> In Argentina mothers took this song as their cry when their children were abducted during Argentina's Dirty War. The woman gathered together for a vigil, and they sang for their lost children by singing these words. They printed Mary's words on posters and hung them on street corners and in windows until the song was eventually banned.

Today we hear the Magnificat, and it is cheerfully surrounded by the sounds of Christmas carols, the sights of poinsettias, and the scent of pine needles, and we think of newborn babies, holiday mirth, and good tidings. But for the women in Argentina, singing over the loss of their babies, the Magnificat was a blood-curdling cry for justice. This puts Mary's song in a different perspective, doesn't it? This isn't your typical lullaby, sweet mother's song. This is a song of defiance, the song of prophet.

Before being executed by the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said these words in a sermon during Advent 1933: "*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 ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings.... This song 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 the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.*"

Mary's Magnificat is radical stuff.

"When God is a child, there's joy in our song. The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong." I wonder, do we realize what we are singing? Such a message has struck fear in kings and among governments. Enough fear to provoke censorship in many places throughout the centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Chapman, *Living the Magnificat* (Mowbray, London: 2007), 93-94.

“The Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly . . .” The song is very hopeful, unless, of course, you happen to be powerful already. If you’re already first, the song rings as a threat. If you’re top of your class or top of your department, if you’re at the top of your game, then according to these songs, you’re in trouble. According to the music, being ahead is about to end. According to the music, you’re doomed. (Merry Christmas!)

My mother once accidentally gave me a gift with nothing in it. I reached into the sack, pulled out the tissue paper, and there was nothing. Apparently she was wrapping several gifts at once, thought she’s placed something in that sack, and filled it with tissue paper. I could feel how lightweight it was when I picked it up, but I searched the whole sack thoroughly, thinking maybe it was one of those gifts where I would find a picture of a gift that’s coming, or maybe it contained a paper clue that would lead me on a treasure hunt to find the real gift. But no. There was absolutely nothing in there. That is what the Magnificat is to rich people, only it isn’t an accident. It is God at work, and the song literally says, “He has sent the rich away empty.”

Somehow, this is supposed to make us joyful. It’s good news, *great news* for the poor, the oppressed, the outcast, and the hungry. It’s stinky news for the rest of us.

Technically I think I’ve been at both ends of the song at various times in my life. Probably I’ve spent a large chunk of time on the privileged end of things, but I’ve also been on the sad end of things like sexism and rejection. On occasion, the Magnificat is good news for someone like me. Most of the time though, it is good news for someone who is not so much like me.

Hmmm, does that mean that in order to hear the good news as good, I’ve got to hear it through my suffering neighbor’s ears, through the ears of someone who is really quite different from me? Does it mean that when my own ears cannot hear the joy of this season, maybe I’m not spending enough time with the right kind of people? Not enough time with the kind of people this message is meant for? Hmmm . . .

It’s a little uncomfortable just how radical Christmas is, if you actually pay attention. It’d be okay if everyone got something in the end. But this isn’t a universalist song. It’s a reversal song, which is way more unsettling.

“The last shall be first, and the weak shall be strong.” If the last are first, then the first end up last. According to the song, this is deeply confusing to the proud, who end up “scattered in the thoughts of their hearts.” The powerful are brought down from their thrones and the rich are left empty-handed.

Songs like these are wake up calls. They are meant to rumble through the centuries, disturbing our superficial peace and interrupting our thinking. If you want something out of this life, you’ll need to find a way to be in solidarity with those who toil and weep. If instead you cling to your riches, you will one day find out that your playthings are empty and you’ve missed out on meeting grace head-on.

Sometimes reversal is good for us. It's a blessing disguised as a kick in the pants. When you realize what you're clinging to for safety could be gone in a flash, that your wealth and your stuff has left you more or less empty, then suddenly your emptiness becomes freedom, your loss morphs into compassion for others, your tears become impetus to do great things, your hands unclench and you begin to share. This is what we call a conversion.

It seems to me there are too many times we misuse religion in order to avoid conversion, we misuse it as a way to stay on top and puff up our sense of self instead of as a way to mingle with the made-in-the-image-of-God people on the bottom. We can hide behind religion for safety and security rather than allowing religion to be the thing that propels us out into the world bearing compassion. But this is what I am finding: the more I try to make religion my unwavering source of comfort, the more religion disappoints me. The more I look to faith for the inspiration to act, the braver I grow. There are certainly times when the Holy Spirit is for us a Great Comforter. It's just that the Spirit is also, and perhaps more often, the Great Instigator. When God instigates, I'm rarely very comfortable.

But the more I find in Jesus a champion of the poor and the oppressed, the more courage I discover for being my own self in the world with kindness and empathy. In knowing Jesus, I realize I can put my heart out in the open in this terribly vulnerable way where it gets wounded and scarred, but I am able to do it because, well, he did, and also, so do all of you. In other words, I realize I'm not alone in this dreadfully scary world, that Love has gone before me, and Love will come again behind.

"When God is a child, there's joy in our song. The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong. And none shall be afraid." The reversal itself is terrifying, but it doesn't have to stay scary. It can become an invitation to freedom and to joy.

Love, in its most radical form, is deeply unsettling for all sorts of people, and Christmas is nothing short of Love at its most explosive.

I hope this Christmas we are unsettled in the best of ways, and that the radical sticks, and keeps sticking. I hope that reversal becomes the song with which we greet each other in joy. I hope we end up so weird and delirious with vision that what is growing in my womb can recognize what is growing in your womb, that we become riotous celebrants of all that God is birthing into this world through you and through me, that I would be Elizabeth arms to your Mary dreams, and visa versa. If we're going to be known as a little eccentric, a little different, a little out-there, dear God, let it be because our love is so dramatic it makes people uncomfortable. They'll have to label us something strange so they don't have to face a love like that as a real possibility for what it means to be Christian.

May you have a revolutionary Christmas. May the unbelievable love of the Christ be made real and undeniable in us. Amen.