

Singing a New Song

Luke 1:47-55

More than any other female, Mary has indelibly marked Christian and Western history and culture, bearing the Christ child as well as all manner of gifts and baggage about the feminine ideal. For the Christian tradition, the Magnificat (which takes its name from the first word of the Latin text) is the great New Testament praise song of liberation. With elegant power and directness, Mary preaches as the prophet of the poor.

In Luke's gospel, as Mary arrives, Elizabeth's unborn child – who will be the prophet John the baptizer – leaps for joy at Mary's greeting. Mary responds to this blessing by singing the glory of God's powerful love that has chosen her to carry the Christ child. She sings because God acts with justice and mercy to lift those considered lowly and to feed those who are hungry.

The Magnificat is revolutionary and has a long history of being banned by various church or political bodies. As recently as the 1980s, the government of Guatemala forbade the public reading of it, as did the government of Argentina in the 1970s. Franciscan Richard Rohr notes that the Magnificat is an elegant example of Jesus' teachings about the obstacles to the coming reign of God. Rohr calls these impediments the three "p's": power, prestige, and possessions. Mary sings at seeing how "the proud," "the powerful," and "the rich" will be "scattered...brought down...sent away empty."

Mary models trusting discipleship that surrenders utterly to God's claim on her life. We never hear of Mary's worthiness or any achievement that made her God's choice to bear the Liberator of humanity. Mary does not see herself as the actor; instead, God is the do-er and actor. Mary sings for all the generations who have hoped, and hope even still, for God's vision of justice to come to fullness in their lives. In Advent, we prepare to celebrate the birth of this saviour, Jesus, who shatters all expectations of what God's power and justice are like.

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Today's Bible Reading

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Additional Bible Readings

Isaiah 35:1-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

God of Justice, help us hear Mary's song as a song for us today. May we sing it loudly and boldly as we seek your justice and peace. Amen.

