

Sermon: My Soul Magnifies the Lord

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, Dec. 19, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

How is it that a simple, uneducated, peasant girl could composed the lyrics, could sing a song that is so subversive, revolutionary and powerful? The song of Mary, or the so call “Mary’s Magnificat” is precisely such a song. Recorded in the Gospel of Luke 1:46-55, the title ‘Magnificat’ is the Latin word of the opening line of the song ‘magnifies’, as in ‘my soul magnifies the Lord’. It is the song that Mary sang, right after the encounter with her relative Elizebeth.

Both women were pregnant at the time, bearing God’s gifts, messengers of the Lord—one to prepare the way, the other to proclaim an everlasting Shalom. Both women were unlikely mothers—one far past the normal age to bear a child, the other a virgin yet to be wedded.

So when these two finally met each other, Elizebeth exclaimed to Mary, *“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”* (Luke 1:42-45)

To such a greeting, Mary replied with her song,

“My soul magnifies 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.” (Luke 1:46-49).

Humble indeed is this servant Mary, highlighting her lowly state and highly precarious situation of being pregnant yet unwed. This pregnancy, this child yet to be born in the town of Bethlehem, would fulfill the words of Prophet Micah, in chapter 5:2-3, *“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”*

From the womb of this lowly servant girl, who was but a child herself, would come a ruler of Israel, and the saviour of the world. But first, from her mouth would come these words of praise,

“For [the Lord] that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.”
(Luke 1:50-54)

As I stated in my opening, this song, these words are truly subversive and revolutionary. Throughout history, people on the margin have identified with this powerful song. According to the article titled: “The Subversive Magnificat: What Mary Expected The Messiah To Be Like”, published in www.enemylove.com, public recitation of Mary’s Magnificat has been banned, in the past century alone, by at least three different governments.

During the British rule of India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being read in church. In the 1980’s, Guatemala’s government discovered Mary’s words to be too dangerous and revolutionary. The song, particularly the part about God’s preferential love for the poor, had been creating quite a stir amongst the impoverished masses. Similarly, the military junta of Argentina outlawed any public display of Mary’s song, in reaction to a group “the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo”—whose children had all disappeared during the so called Dirty War—who began placing the Magnificat’s words on posters throughout the capital. People on the margin, particularly in the three above cited examples, have one thing in common, they have all believed that God can actually bring liberation to their plight.

The German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized the empowering nature of Mary’s song. In his sermon during the 1933 Advent, Bonhoeffer said, *“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.”*

Getting back to my opening question: How is it that a simple, uneducated, peasant girl could sing such a powerful song? Perhaps Mary did not sing alone.

Christianity had long portrayed Mary of Bethlehem as ‘gentle, tender and dreamy’, as Bonhoeffer rightly pointed out in his sermon. Allow me

then to try to reconstruct Mary of Nazareth, as someone who was feisty, resilient, even warrior like, who was present beside the manger, and who would eventually stand tall beside the cross. The key to reconstruct this Mary lies in the echos of her song.

Our first echo is Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Hannah was once barren. She was constantly tormented by her husband's second wife, who had children. So every year Hannah would go up to the temple in Shiloh and prayed to the Lord for a child. God eventually answered Hannah's prayer, and she named the child 'Samuel' or literally 'God has heard', for she said, "I have asked him of the Lord". In due time, Hannah presented Samuel to God, and left him under the care of Eli the priest, to be instructed in service to the Lord. She then prayed this prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1,

"My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God.

My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory."

Jumping forward a few verses, Hannah continued,

"The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength (v.4)...Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil (v.5)...The Lord raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour." (v.7)

Do you hear an echo to Mary's song? Let us continue to Deborah, the judge and prophetess, in the Book of Judges. In her song as recorded in Judges 5, Deborah recalls the heroic act of Jael. Jael was the wife of Heber the Kenite, who invited Sisera into her tent. At that time, Sisera was the commander of the army under King Jabin of Canaan, who had greatly oppressed the Israelites. During a decisive battle where Sisera's army was routed, he took shelter in Jael's tent. He asked for water, she gave him milk, then fed him and covered him with a rug. So when the commander let down his guard and closed his eyes, Jael took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and drove it into his temple, until it went down into the ground. For that cunning and courageous act, of swiftly dispatching an arch-enemy of the Israelites, Prophetess Deborah lauded Jael in her song, twice calling her as "most blessed of women" (Judges 5:24).

Do you hear another echo of Mary's song? Let us now turn to Judith. The Book of Judith in the Apocrypha tells the story of a Jewish widow, who used her beauty and charm to save her hometown Bethulia from an imminent invasion by the Assyrians. She did so by going into the camp of the enemy general, Holofernes, with whom she slowly gained his trust. So

in one night, as Assyrian general lied in a drunken stupor, Judith decapitated him, and took his head back to her fearful countrymen. The story, the context and its setting is ahistorical, closer to a theological novel. One interesting note about the fictional town of Bethulia lies in its name, which literally means Yahweh's virgin. Another interesting note about this story lies in how Judith was praised, in chapter 13 of the book,

“O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God, who created the heavens and the earth, who has guided you to cut off the head of the leader of our enemies.”

Do you hear yet another echo to Mary? And it doesn't end there. If one takes a careful look at the genealogy of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. One will find the names of four women, of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, stitched into this genealogy. Four strong women, outsiders yet foremothers of Jesus, whose stories echo and resonate with the song of Mary. It is as if when Elizebeth invites Mary into her room, she inadvertently invite all these strong, feisty and powerful women into a most unusual communion, a most unusual SATB choir across time and space. And together, they compose and sing the Magnificat through the voice of Mary.

What does all these stories mean for us here today? I honestly do not know. For once, I will no longer see Mary as meek and mild. She is much more complex than we sometimes allow her to be. Yet at the same time, I am having trouble seeing Mary as a warrior. She did not kill in order to save, except by the most torturous logic that Mary slayed her own freewill by submitting to God's will.

But, isn't that what love is? Love in the sense of Agape—love that is expressed in the act of self-sacrifice. And it is by such love, that will one day take both the child and the mother to the cross. And it is by such love, that the old world order of 'might makes right' is inexorably shattered.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.