

Luke 1:46-56

46 And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
48 for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

56 And Mary remained with her for about three months and then
returned to her home.

Magnificent Mary

Luke's text tells us that Elizabeth is a righteous woman, who along with her husband Zechariah, is getting on in years. We also learn that Mary, a very young woman, is engaged to marry Joseph.

Mary and Elizabeth live in a world where a woman's worth and value are determined by her ability to bear children, particularly male children, because wealth and lands are secured through baby boys with good Jewish mamas.

Elizabeth, like many righteous women before her, Sarah and Hannah come to mind, endures the unfair shame of being unable to meet societal expectations. Mary, engaged to an older man, and most likely a teenager, even at such a young age, is already being asked to begin bearing the weight of lofty societal expectations: *Baby boys. Submissive and quiet lives. Don't break the system.*

I believe that Luke's choice of Mary and Elizabeth to be the mothers of John and Jesus is provocative and compelling. Unlikely women, one too old, and one too young, will mother, and ready, and ultimately shape the lives of two men who will prepare Israel for God's presence.

Mary and Elizabeth respond immediately and enthusiastically to God's call on their lives. Mary says, "Here am I, Lord!"

Mary and Elizabeth are the first in a series of characters throughout this gospel that defy societal expectations of gender, class, and race. They help reveal that God's coming into the world is gonna turn the order of things up-side-down (or right-side-up depending on how you look at it!). And oh, by the way, their husbands, and many of the other male protagonists of the story will eventually recognize God's presence and possibilities – but it takes them a lot longer to do so. Mary and Elizabeth initiate a movement of strong women whose hard work and exemplary faith have ensured our ability to tell the story today.

I want to focus the majority of this homily on Mary's joyful response to her calling, what we call the Magnificat or Mary's Song, and how each of us can help birth God's newness in the coming season. But I don't think I can do so without first saying a word about the troublesome nature of these birth stories.

Elizabeth represents all that is good and righteous. And yet she is marginalized for something very common. Like millions upon millions of women, she is unable to be a biological mother, for any number of reasons, be they physical, emotional, social, or simply by choice. If we are to be God's people, this is a stigma that cannot stand. Elizabeth has, and will always be whole, her life supremely sacred, regardless of whom she mothers or doesn't.

And then there is Mary. Pregnant by less traditional means. Her welfare is wholly contingent upon her fiancée's willingness to formally recognize the validity and value of a child born in less formal confines. Luke's author tells us that Mary makes the choice to bring a child into a chaotic world, but it's hard to believe that Mary ever had much of a choice in all of this.

I am beyond grateful that Mary brought Jesus into this world. Jesus reveals for me a God of infinite possibilities and unlimited creativity and grace. And such a revelation leads me to believe that had Mary lived in an era where every person had reproductive autonomy, that the choices she made, any of which would be sacred, would not have negated God's presence among us.

I believe that Jesus calls us into a world where husbands cannot quietly dismiss their partners from responsibilities in which they share equal if not more investment. Furthermore, I believe Jesus calls us into a world

where our neighbors, especially people of child-bearing age, have the emotional, physical, spiritual, and economic resources to significantly reduce or limit their exposure to, if not permanently remove themselves from choiceless circumstances.

God did not, nor will God ever come into the world to chain women or any other human beings to oppressive and patriarchal systems. God came into this world, still comes into this world, to liberate each and every one of us. May our Christmas story be a story that affords every person the choice – the real, sacred choice – to live into their purpose.

Now back to Mary's Magnificat. Somehow, someday, God sees fit to come back into the world in the least predictable way possible – a child is gonna be born to an unwed, teenage mother in a forgotten part of the world, long subjugated to the abuses of empire. There is zero pomp and circumstance. And oh, by the way, this teenager is going to spend several months in isolation with her septuagenarian cousin who is also expecting to birth a prophet of significance. And while the Angel brought glad tidings of new life, he never said a word about per diems, or a place to live, or where to find a discount on formula, wipes, and diapers.

All of this to say, God does not invite Mary and Elizabeth into an easy life. What lies ahead of them is overwhelming in every way.

And what does Mary say?

'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

Mary continues by reciting the generational accomplishments of God in the life of Israel.

Mary sees opportunity. Mary sees possibility. Mary determines to live her life in such a way as to usher God's goodness into the world. Right now! And she does! Mary not only brings Jesus into the world, but she stays by his side all the way through Easter.

Here in 2024, I think we all feel a little overwhelmed. Just this week, there's a winter chill slowing our stamina, not to mention a winter cold/bug/virus making untimely and unwelcome visits to many Millbrook households. And we've had some trauma – we've lost good friends, and we have loved ones who are sick, and injured, and infirmed. And we're racing to put our yearly affairs in order. All while we look and feel Christmasy.

Pandemic, and polarization, and partisanship have generated a kind of paralysis. But it's also a time of significant change. In the last 60 months, our world has fundamentally shifted how it chooses to work, and to communicate, not to mention worship. God says, "I'm coming into the world!" And we say, "Did you send me a Google calendar invite, and is this via Zoom or in person?" And if you choose to come here via Amazon, or Grub Hub, please just leave it at the door!

Yes, yes, yes, of course, we want to do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly. We want to create a better world for our neighbors. But just going out to get groceries, or meeting a friend for coffee seems

Herculean these days. And there's so much need in the world. How can we begin to make a difference? And where would we even start?

The Gospel of Luke is the story of people just like you and me, determining to get started. We meet Mary and Elizabeth in the early stages of pregnancy, the life event that is most representative of life's wonderful chaos. Hope, joy, anxiety, fear, comfort, discomfort, hormones, tears, laughs, hugs...the emotions are varied and endless. In one another, Mary and Elizabeth find community and support, and even more importantly, a sense of joy and hope. In one another, they find the strength to live out their calling.

As a congregation, we have an opportunity to do our own nesting. This sanctuary, and indeed our extended virtual sanctuary, can serve as a place to share what's happening in our own lives with one another – both the chaotic and the calm. And perhaps in that sharing, we can find a more enduring sense of community, the kind that gives us resolve to carve out something new in the world.

In community, Mary and Elizabeth discovered and appreciated what was growing in each of their lives, but they also recognized God's work in the lives of their ancestors.

This is a chaotic time to be alive. But it's also a wonderful time to be alive. In the coming year, we have an opportunity to imagine, and ultimately shape a community that seeks to bear witness to God's newness in the world. Think about it. The kind of work we're about to engage in will redefine how our little-c church, not to mention the big-c Church, will express what it means to be followers of Jesus. We're birthing a newer, more enduring expression of God in the world.

Magnificent Mary
Bob Stillerman
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Luke 1:46-56



Yes, it's overwhelming, maybe even a little terrifying. But how blessed we are to be able to engage this opportunity. I pray that we will choose to say, "Here we are, Lord." And I pray that we too will sing a song of praise.

May it be so, and may it be soon!

Amen.