

*Holy God, in this season of Advent expectation, we give You thanks for the example of Mary, the mother of our Savior. Teach us what it means to bear witness in our bodies and in all our living, that with Mary, we may sing Your mercy in full voice. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

“And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.’” For two millennia, the Annunciation to Mary and her Magnificat have generated beautiful art and music in the cultural heritage of Christianity. In Western art and Eastern iconography, we often see a haloed Mary radiant and peaceful, her eyes cast down modestly, a half-smile playing at her lips as she ponders her future in the purposes of God. She is serene. Full of grace.

The virgin Mary had heard astonishing news from the archangel Gabriel: she would bear a child—one who would become a great ruler, Son of the Most High. Mary did not hide her face, as Moses had when addressed by the Divine Voice at the burning bush. Mary was not struck speechless for seven days, as Ezekiel had been when he saw the divine chariot. She was not terrified and overwhelmed by fear, as had been the priest Zechariah when he heard this same Gabriel announce the conception of his son, baby John the Baptist.<sup>1</sup> Mary neither trembled nor fell to the ground; instead, she pressed the glorious archangel for clarification, which, I think we can all agree, showed moxie. “How can this be,” she asked, “since I am a virgin?” Gabriel offered that she would be “overshadowed” by the Holy Spirit and

that “nothing will be impossible with God.”<sup>2</sup> Mary responded with one of the most famous lines uttered by a woman in human history: “Let it be with me according to your word.” And there it was. Mary has been lauded ever since for her quiet submission to the Holy Spirit—elevated especially in Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and evangelical Protestant tradition as the matchless exemplar of docile Christian womanhood. Mary-in-her-yielding has been taken as the model of Christian faith.

Now, it’s inspiring, to be sure. But that perfect erasure of Mary’s will is impossible for us regular folks to emulate, and the Church’s emphasis on submission has left some believers frustrated, even spiritually oppressed. And over the centuries, Mary’s submission has proved a little too handy for the Church hierarchy—a little too easily exploited. Her example has become a way of thinking about faith that is suspiciously pliable to the desires of those in ecclesiastical authority.

So here’s what I think.

I think that in our present cultural moment, when so many who’ve been abused and demeaned are finding the courage to speak out against sexual assault, virulent racism, unbridled greed— in this moment, beloved,

we may wish to recall *more of the Scriptures*

than just, “Let it be with me according to your word.”

Scripture tells us that there are many ways to be faithful,  
and there is more to Mary than quiet submission.

In fact, Mary is courageous, and the Magnificat is a song of resistance.

Mary sings a God who overthrows the proud and the powerful,

a God who lifts up the abused and the abjected,

a God who strengthens the subjugated and the silenced.

And when we go deeper into the Scriptural antecedents of her song,

we hear the strains of a fierce and uncompromising incarnational prophecy.

In Mary's day, the Magnificat was already an old, old song—passed down for 40 generations, since before David had been made king.<sup>3</sup> The song was originally on the lips of Hannah, a woman unable to conceive who was treated with contempt in a culture that prized women's bodies for childbearing. Desperate for a child, Hannah had prayed at the shrine at Shiloh. The incompetent priest there assumed that her fervent praying was drunken incoherence, and mocked her.<sup>4</sup> But "the LORD remembered Hannah"; she conceived and bore Samuel, who would grow up to become a powerful judge and a terrifying warrior. Hannah sang the Magnificat—a lot like what you have in your bulletin as Cantic 15, except considerably more alarming. The Song of Hannah delights in God's power to break the bows of the mighty, to shatter adversaries, to cut off the wicked in darkness. It gets very "Game of Thrones" when Hannah exults, "The LORD kills."<sup>5</sup> That's the tradition on which the Magnificat is drawing.<sup>6</sup>

So, Mary: finding herself in unthinkable circumstances—unmarried virgin,  
pregnant, certainly to be cast aside by Joseph, at risk of being stoned for adultery:<sup>7</sup>

Mary claims the ferocious Song of Hannah as her own.

Both women celebrate God's power to reverse injustice.

But where Hannah had indulged in gloating over her enemies,<sup>8</sup>

Mary frames everything—all of our living, the joys and the risks,

the mystery, the unknown—

she frames all of it by means of God's radical mercy.

The mercy Mary sings is not some kind of cheap forgiveness,

not weakness or passivity or docility.

It's nothing like the failure of accountability in sinful human relationships

deformed by exploitation and fear.

Mary sings an incarnational mercy that fights for the flourishing of all.

Mary sings God's relentless might on behalf of

those who are abased and alone,

those who are judged and shamed,

those who have been ignored and forgotten.

Mary—young, pregnant and powerless—claims God as her Source of Mercy!

That's life-changing mercy,

cosmos-transforming mercy,

*new-creation* mercy!<sup>9</sup>

You may have noticed that throughout our worship this morning are threaded  
many beautiful strains of the Magnificat.

We had two movements of the Magnificat by Dupré in the organ prelude,  
then Canticle 15 sung so beautifully by the choir.

Coming up, we'll sing a contemporary Magnificat in our Offertory hymn,  
“Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!”<sup>10</sup>

And after the service has ended, Simon will play a Bach fugue on the Magnificat  
as the postlude. So many Magnificat melodies—different settings and dictions from  
various composers and historical eras, sung and played in many different ways.

Christian life is like that. Our living is threaded through with strains of the  
Magnificat—sung by courageous individuals and small groups and whole  
communities, rejoicing and struggling, living real life in the incarnational purposes  
of God.

It's not about quiet submission.

It's not about spiritual docility.

It's about God's radical, relentless mercy on behalf of everything that lives.<sup>11</sup>

This Advent, I encourage you to claim God's mercy.

Sing your Magnificat with notes of lyrical serenity, if you like;

or sing it in a fierce shout of resistance.

Sing ... and listen!

Listen for the Magnificats groaned by those who suffer,  
whispered by those who are afraid.

This is our Advent heritage:

to call on the Mighty One whose name is Mercy.

Take heart, beloved:

He is powerful beyond anything we can imagine,  
and He is near.

Amen.

Carolyn J. Sharp

17 December 2017

Advent 3B

Isa 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:46-55 as Canticle 15; 1 Thess 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Preached at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

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<sup>1</sup> See Luke 1:12.

<sup>2</sup> Here is another echo of ancient tradition: the divine promise that Abraham and Sarah would have offspring in their old age (Gen 18:14). I find irony in the way in which Luke uses literary allusion to biblical traditions of barren women celebrating their longed-for pregnancies—irony given that Mary's conception is entirely unanticipated by her and the child will overturn all social and political expectations for the longed-for Messiah. Fred B. Craddock hears the resonance this way: "As a final word of assurance, the angel recalls the creed behind all creeds, the very words spoken to Abraham and Sarah when they doubted the word that they were to have a child.... What God has done for Mary anticipates and models what God will do for the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed of the world ... the triumph of God's

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purposes for all people everywhere (vv. 50-55).” See Craddock, *Luke* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 28-29.

<sup>3</sup> The Song of Hannah is in 1 Samuel 2. “40 generations”: see the genealogy in Luke 3:23-38.

<sup>4</sup> The Spirit-inspired prayer of the faithful looked like drunkenness to non-believers on the day of Pentecost also; see Acts 2:13.

<sup>5</sup> “The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up” (1 Sam 2:6). Those who would prefer that God be active only in healing and life-giving activity will have to reckon also with Isaiah 45:7, “I make light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things,” and with the many other biblical texts that envision God as Divine Warrior.

<sup>6</sup> See Joel B. Green’s treatment of the Divine Warrior imagery that underlies the Magnificat in his *Luke* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 102-105.

<sup>7</sup> On Joseph potentially declining to marry this pregnant virgin, see Matt 1:19-20. On punishment for adultery in ancient Israel, see e.g. Lev 20:10.

<sup>8</sup> The sense of Hannah “gloating” is clear from the opening line of the song in 1 Samuel 2. The NRSV translates the relevant clause in v. 1, “My mouth derides my enemies,” and the JPS Tanakh has, “I gloat over my enemies.” In the reversals limned in this ferocious poetry, Hannah even celebrates God’s power to bereave mothers of their children (v. 5). The vindictiveness of Hannah’s tone, heard against the backdrop of the plot in 1 Samuel 1, should be remarked. Luke has worked artfully with his sources to achieve a far more eirenic tone in the Magnificat.

<sup>9</sup> My reference is to 2 Cor 5:16-19: “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view.... So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

<sup>10</sup> “Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!” appears as ## 437/438 in the Episcopal *Hymnal 1982*. The words are by Timothy Dudley-Smith (1926–), still living and now a retired bishop of the Church of England. Our tune for today is *Woodlands* by Walter Greatorex (1877-1949).

<sup>11</sup> God’s mercy on behalf of *everything that lives*: my hope and challenge for Christian theologians is that we include in our conception of God’s compassion the well-being of all living things, including the non-human creatures that suffer so

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terribly because of overt human cruelty and our failure to safeguard their natural habitats. The Magnificat builds our capacity to resist violence. As we sing the Magnificat literally and metaphorically, I encourage all of us to consider concrete steps we can take to decline to participate in violence against animals, birds, fish, and other living creatures.