

There's Something About Mary

Part 3: Singing Mary's Song

Luke 1:39-56
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
December 11, 2016

Welcome to Part 3 of this sermon series on Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the theological field of study known as Mariology. In preparing for the season of Advent this year the hope of our Worship & Music ministry team has been to **reclaim Mary – from both what we consider the excesses of the Roman Catholic tradition, and the lack of attention or storybook image in our Protestant tradition.** That's what we've explored the past two Sundays. Today, we move beyond tradition to examine an understanding of Mary from progressive and feminist perspectives.

It's important to try to envision Mary as an actual person living in her own context, knowing that we learn very little about her from the scriptures themselves. And what is written about her is understood by progressives more as metaphorical language steeped in the theology of the gospel writers than it is of a record of actual literal history. Dr. Helen K Bond, New Testament lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, writes:

What can speak to us best is her humanity. Mary shares women's experiences: her early arranged marriage, her struggle to keep the family together after the death of her husband, her love for her son, and her grief at his death. It is the human Mary who reaches across the centuries to women in every age and every culture.

One of my hopes, therefore, for this extensive emphasis on Mary during Advent is that we will come to approach Mary as a biblical figure that *can* play a role in our own spiritual development – specifically calling us to God's work of social justice, hospitality, and compassion.

Two very important resources to which I turn to often use are *The Women's Bible Commentary*, and the *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*. In the latter, there is an article on Mariology written by South Korean feminist, and pastor in Seoul, **Han Kuk Yom**. In support of some of the tradition, she believes doctrines of Mary, and the spirituality attached to her adoration, provide some of the missing female imagery for God that was lost in the male, monotheistic traditions. She writes, "**When the Protestant Reformers rejected worship related to Mary as unbiblical, they provided an important critique but also eliminated this source of female imagery in worship.**" In fact, it is believed that the Roman Catholic Church intentionally allowed veneration of Mary to go as far as it did because it actually served as an evangelistic tool to draw people to Christianity from indigenous pagan religions, most of which included female deities. In other words, devotion to Mary made her a figure that functions in many ways like a goddess,

Christianity's adaptation of the feminine dimension of the divine. Reclaiming that missing dimension is crucial for us today in order to gain a fuller understanding of the nature and character of God.

Yom continues, "Since the late 1970s, there has been a great transformation of Mariology through the work of feminist theologians. They have criticized traditional Mariology as an ideology of sexism. The concept of perpetual virginity is seen as misogyny and disdain for women's sexuality. Mary's words of assent to the angel Gabriel in Luke 1:39, 'Let it be with me according to your word,' and her image as the new Eve have been criticized as tools for the patriarchal order of the church. The dualism represented by Mary, the obedient sinless virgin, in contrast with Eve, the disobedient sinner, is rejected by women who understand this to be a false stereotype of women as either saint or sinner.

"At the same time, some feminist theologians have sought out the positive aspects of Mariology and worked to transform the traditional doctrines." That is a common goal in progressive theological thought – to reclaim instead of throwing out. "For instance, Mary's virginity is seen as a symbol of autonomy, as she is not dependent on any man and could carry out God's liberating action directly through her own life." It's like the new Disney princesses who don't need a prince to rescue them from anything! "Mary's obedience and servanthood is reinterpreted to emphasize her active response of faith to God's call...She no longer is understood as a model of oppression of women but as a model of their liberation."

This new understanding of Mariology has emerged, in part, from **the third world**. They particularly emphasize the **Magnificat** from **Luke 1:46-55** as the main text for feminist Mariology. This passage is part of this morning's Gospel reading, also known as the **Song of Mary**, which we will look at in more detail in just a moment. "Mary is seen as the representative of the oppressed people. She represents God's preferential option for the poor. Her prophetic words are understood as the basis of a **spirituality of revolution, a call for liberation of women and of all victims of poverty and injustice.**" Fearing the oppressed and impoverished masses, last century at least three different countries banned the public reading of Mary's Song, the Magnificat, even in church, because those governments considered the song's message to be dangerously subversive and a threat to their power. Those countries included India during the time of British rule, Guatemala in the 1980s, and later in Argentina. This message was recognized by others, as well. Before being executed by the Nazis, German theologian **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** stated during an Advent sermon in 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.

What many of us have missed is Mary's example as a real person of faith, called by God, struggling with the daily demands of her life. In fact, Luke portrays Mary as nothing less than a prophet, an initial participant in a new and radical movement that would be led by her son. Unlike the quiet and passive image we often have of her, Mary is actually an outspoken voice for justice. Here's the biblical context. When Mary

went to visit her relative Elizabeth (who was pregnant herself with who would become John the Baptist), Mary is greeted with, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Luke 1:42). Responding to Elizabeth's blessing, Luke puts on the lips of Mary a song that most biblical scholars believe was a later liturgical song used in early Jewish-Christian liturgical worship. These scholars also see this song as inspired by a scattering of Old Testament passages, especially modeled after the song of Hannah in the book of 1 Samuel.

The song in Luke is known by the title, **The Magnificat**. That's because that is the first word in the song in Latin, meaning 'to magnify.' In English, the first line is, "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" (Luke. 1:46-48). The song goes on to praise God for the great things God has done for Mary, and for God's mercy from generation to generation, going all the way back to the covenant with Abraham and Sarah. But then we encounter that very different picture of Mary from what many of us are familiar. **In a decidedly prophetic, and yes political call to justice, Mary recognizes God as the One who shakes up the status quo.** Luke uses Mary's song to foreshadow her son's prophetic ministry that will do the very same thing.

Mary's Song becomes, in essence, an overture for the theme of the whole of Luke's gospel. When Mary sings about being lowly, she is not just referring to humility, but also about actual poverty and the precarious position in which she finds herself. We must not forget that Mary is very young, poor, pregnant, unmarried, living under the oppression of the Roman Empire. Given these circumstances, the culture in which she lived would have looked upon her with shame, and as someone to be despised and rejected, if not stoned to death for adultery. But that's not how God saw her! And that's the twist. James Kay, a preaching professor at Princeton Theological Seminary (a Presbyterian seminary) wrote an article for the *Christian Century* magazine back in 1997 that beautifully frames Mary's Song in all its prophetic glory. He writes:

Mary sings...a freedom song on behalf of all the faithful poor in the land. She sings a song of freedom for all who, in their poverty and their wretchedness, still believe that God will make a way where there is no way. Like John the Baptist, **Mary prophesies deliverance, she prophesies about a way that is coming in the wilderness of injustice.**

Mary reveals a God who 'has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts'; who 'has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly'; who 'has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.' **What we learn is that contrary to conventional wisdom in any culture God is not partial to the rich, the powerful, or the proud.**

But are we seeing this being played out in real life?? I wonder what all this says about our recent political process? What about the reversal of fortunes where the lowly will be lifted up, the proud scattered, the rich sent away empty, and the powerful brought down from their thrones? What about upending the status quo? Do only powerful millionaires and billionaires get to govern our country? Where is the promise being fulfilled in Mary's Song? Well, like the major theme of the season of Advent itself, it shows that we are indeed still caught in an in-between time, a time between the 'now' and the 'not yet.'

With Mary's Song, however, our is a call to hope. It's also a call to action. So the question that I pose to you, and us, this morning is this: **Should Mary's song not be our song as well?** I guess it depends on which choir you sing with. But for myself and College Hill I think the choir we want to sing in is the one that does sing this prophetic song of justice – our as Chancel Choir will perform next Sunday during worship: John Rutter's *Magnificat*. It is a song of hope of what God – through us – will do for the poor, the powerless, and the marginalized of the world; a song that we sing on behalf of all those who mourn, or are lonely, or do not have enough food, or do not have a roof over their head, or live in places of strife and war, or who struggle with mental illness or a physical illness and those who care for them, and so many more.

Let Mary's humanity and her song of joy and hope, which serves as a call for social transformation, be our incentive to reclaim the relevance of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in guiding and providing courage and motivation to our own spiritual life – as individuals and as a congregation.

When we are in need of direction and hope, Luke points us to Mary. He presents her not as a goddess, nor a statue of alabaster in a musty cathedral, nor a plastic or ceramic figurine molded with a sweet and innocent posture to stand lifeless on a coffee table or Communion Table manger scene. Mary can serve as a genuine example of faith acted out in discipleship and response to God's call to serve.

And finally, **as Mary gave birth to the Christ Child within her, let us also continuously give birth to Christ's Sacred Presence within us, and in doing so recognize the Divine in one another.**

Amen.

Selected Resources:

The Women's Bible Commentary

Dictionary of Feminist Theologies

Luke, Westminster Bible Companion, Sharon Ringe

New Interpreter's Bible Commentary

Mariology of the Catholic Church, Wikipedia

History of Catholic Mariology, Wikipedia

The Invisible, Protestant Mary, Daniel Hazard

The Protestant Reformers on Mary, servantofchrist.tripod.com

Mary's Song – and Ours, James F. Kay

Mary, the Reluctant Prophet, Alyce M. McKenzie

Who Was the Real Virgin Mary?, Helen Bond

Mary as a Role Model, Byron L. Rohrig

A New Perspective on Mary, Mark Hanson

A Modern Magnificat, Rev. Dr. Karin Case

The Subversive Magnificat: What Mary Expected the Messiah to Be Like, Jason Porterfield

Magnificat! Learning to Sing Mary's Song (A Progressive Christian Lectionary Commentary), Carl Gregg at patheos.com