

The Advent of a New Beginning in our Land: Reflections from the Song of Mary.

The Rev Dr Harold Porter

Harbor Unitarian-Universalist Congregation, Muskegon, MI December 13, 2020

On this 3rd Sunday of Advent, having lit the candles of Hope, Love, we light the candle of Joy. With that, let us hear the words of a poor, teen age, unmarried, pregnant woman. It is the longest speech by a woman in the New Testament. Luke 1:46-44.

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.

For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;
For he who is mighty has done great things for me,
And holy is his name.

And his mercy will come to generation after generation
of those who fear him.

He has shown the strength of his arm,
and has put the arrogant to rout, along with their private schemes;

He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted the lowly;

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

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

As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham
and to his posterity forever.”

And Mary remained with Elizabeth, her kinswoman who also was with child, about three months, and then Mary returned to her home. Her words have been titled, The Magnificat, really Mary’s Song, a prophetic canticle.

D L Mayfield, writing in the Washington Post, speaks for many regarding Mary and this Song. She states, “When I was 15, I was cajoled into playing the role of Mary in our church’s Christmas nativity scene. I was embarrassed, stuffing a pillow under a robe to signify pregnancy, but I felt I had no choice: I was the pastor’s daughter, and there was no one else who could play the role. My cheeks burning in shame, I

remember feeling little connection to Mary, (some would call) the Mother of God. I was silent in the play. Mary, in our tradition, was a vehicle for Jesus: a holy womb, a good and compliant and obedient girl.

Much later in life, I was shocked to discover that Mary was not quiet, nor was she what I would call meek and mild.”

I, too, grew up like most Protestants thinking Mary a nice person of faith, who on her own, agreed with the angelic visitor, to be the one to birth a son, name Jesus, who would be God’s own presence in this world, saving all creatures, great and small, into a beloved community.

Yes, we Protestants, sort of took Mary’s beatific life for granted. We understood Mary to have said to the angel, “Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” So, we thought, she had a choice about this pregnancy, and decided yes. But beyond that willing faith, she was simply in the shadows, until near the end when she is found weeping for her first son Jesus, on the cross.

Not so with the Catholics or Eastern Orthodox strands of Christianity. With them Mary’s status evolved. She was understood in the purest of ways, immaculately conceived, that is, born without sin, and remained that way, and even proclaimed the Mother of God. Well, Catholics may have over elevated her and we protestants underrated her, but we all generally agreed, she was the finest of all women in the church hierarchy.

Mary is also held in high regard within the Moslem faith, which came into being seven hundred years after Christianity. They hold her to be supreme above all woman and she remains the only woman mentioned in the Koran, their sacred scriptures.

Yes, Mary, with her gentle and forgiving heart, has long softened the patriarchal edge of the church, as someone all could bear their soul to, and find comfort and even forgiveness. I thought the Beatles highlighted this in their song:

“When I find myself in time of trouble
Mother Mary comes to me,
Speaking words of wisdom – let it be!

And in my hour of darkness
 She stands right in front of me,
 Speaking words of wisdom – let it be!”

Still, it does seem we have not fully understood Mary, for what we have here in her song is not a sweet, meek and mild faith. Rather, the Magnificat, reveals an empowering feminism, a prophetic revolutionist.

Mary, having now felt called by God into his service, sings out in harmony with the great prophets of her Hebraic faith, declaring:

God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
 and has put the arrogant to rout, along with their private schemes; *
 He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
 and exalted the lowly;
 He has filled the hungry with good things,
 and the rich he has sent empty away.

Mary foresees a revolution! A new political arrangement. Who would have thought so? Indeed, a recent survey of this passage with 1100 evangelical Christians, 28% never even heard of this scripture, and 43% never read or discussed it! The most popular English song version of the Magnificat, and there are many, leaves out the part of the “mighty being over throne and the rich being sent away empty.” And in several countries, the reading of these words was forbidden in public, or in the worship liturgy – fearing, of course, a local uprising.

On the other hand, some have read it rightly – as good news! Artist, Ben Wildflower, painted Mary with her fist raised to the sky and her foot stepping on a snake. Her words, “God has put down the ruler from their thrones and exalted the lowly” were embedded on the margin.

Also, this scripture, Mary’s Song, would be the song for the mostly Catholic movement in Latin America, who realized it was in essence, a Theology of Liberation, which was much needed in Central America whose peoples had long suffered under dictators and capitalistic exploitation, some from the USA. If justice, equal and fair treatment was to be had, the oppressors needed to be opposed and replaced. So, they sang Mary’s song, with all the words, and worked to fulfil its liberating message in spite of the countless crosses they would have to bear.

*Scholars version

A theology of liberation was a costly struggle and we recall in El Salvador, of Arch Bishop Oscar Romero, murdered while conducting Mass. He was one, among the many, who courageously took the Magnificat to heart. Murdered in 1980, Romero 38 years later was rightly canonized as a saint by Pope Francis, who too sings Mary's Song and very well.

The Magnificat literally means magnify and it reminded the faithful to magnify God in their lives and in our world, the God of justice and compassion, the God who places himself on the side of the least, who has a preferential love for the poor and the over looked.

And it was also clear that Jesus understood his Mother's Song. After all, Jesus' very first sermon, when asked to speak in the synagogue, was this:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed.

We should not be surprised it is evident that Mary, not Joseph, was Jesus' primary faith teacher. Mothers often are. And Mary sang it to her first-born son as a joyous lullaby. It remains a canticle of hope we need today. Yes, for today!

Even though we are still facing a pandemic that demands discipline from each of us, and courage, we will need both with the advent of the new beginning in our land, under very different leadership. Joseph Biden is our new President Elect, having received a decisive victory, both in the popular vote, and the Electoral College. And with Mary's Song in mind, it seems right to analyze just what we have gone through as a nation since Donald Trump - the Trumpism years - and how we may possibly move on beyond this polarizing government and damaged nation.

Looking back, one of the many ironies of the 2016 election was Russia. As the Mueller Report made clear, the Russians were working full time to get Trump elected, especially in Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, including using stealth propaganda ads such as, "Trump is our only hope for a better future!"

Trump did win in those three states which enabled his victory in The Electoral College, placing him in the White House, even without winning the popular vote of

the people! Even so, we might ask four years later, was Trump our only hope for a better future?

I think what generally can be said now, even by some of his more rational supporters, is that under Trump, our democracy has grown in despair, division, and distrustfulness!

A majority of our nation clearly felt this rogue of an American President lacked most of the core values meant for any American in high office: decency, fairness, honesty, and dedication to the rule of law. Trump has alienated our world-wide friends and given hope to some of the world's worst rulers. His achievements for our nation, which have been sparse, was a rich man's tax cut and packing the Supreme Court with the most conservative and legalistic judges!

And yes, even though we all have fallen short, Trump overwhelmingly embodied the antithesis of the Christian values he claimed, or the Golden Rule most religions believe in. He bore false witness daily, demeaned any who disagreed with him, and acted as if the USA was his own self, that he was above the law, as he falsely stated many times, "The Constitution gives me the right to do whatever I want as president."

For many of these reasons he was impeached, but vindicated narrowly by the Senate with its Republican majority.

But even with him in office, all was not negative, or at a loss these past four years in our country. And with Mary's song to guide us, let us be reminded of some of the significant events which helped keep hope alive and enriched our democracy as an inclusive and diverse people, equally one, still gathered under the law of our Constitution, up to now.

---I think one of the most significant events of this time was the **Women' March on Washington**, the very day after Donald Trump was sworn into office. Yes, it was largely a reaction to what Trump believed and a fear of what he may undo now as president. It remains the largest single day of protest and advocacy in U S history.

The grievances of the marchers were many: safeguarding human and women's rights, immigration and health care reform, saving the environment, affirming the recent achievements of full equality for LGBT persons, health care as a moral right, reproductive rights, and racial and minority equality, and religious tolerance. Under

the Trump administration all were threatened, and some were stalled or reversed. But they were all issues Unitarians stood up for, and many of you marched that day!

Mary, it is evident, would have marched too, with full feminine voice, to lift up the lives of those at the bottom, and to enfranchise those that had been left out. She would rejoice that greatest number of women ever were now in congress, and now as our Nation's Vice-President!

---And, secondly during these last four years, women also stood up in another movement and called out "**Me, Too!**" confessing publicly about the sexual harassment and violence they experienced. And their courage in speaking up encouraged others to do so, and finding relief and support from one another. And even The President was called out by a dozen of courageous women, which he publicly denied, but in the infamous Hollywood tape he described how capable he was of getting women to response to his aggressive grabbing!

Well, Mary, too, faced sexual taboos, being pregnant without a husband, but she rose above such harassment, saying "Behold, God has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden." Even Joseph had first thought to divorce her, and it is perhaps why she stayed three months in isolation with Elizabeth her cousin, finding understanding with their common pregnancies.

---And then next in our country came the cries, **Black Lives Matter!** over a series of episodes when black, unarmed citizens, were killed by overaggressive or mishandled policing. Racism was vividly exposed once again in our country! And, after George Floyd's brutal death, our country literally rebelled, with a civic unrest not seen since the assassination of MLK.

And, in solidarity with the protests here, demonstrations took place in countless cities in sixty countries around the world! Our administration's America First Policy, had alienated us from many of our friends around the world, yet here they were marching in their own streets for a Black Minnesotan they didn't even know, reminding America that we should remain what we claimed to be, the land of the free, with equal human rights for all, the champion of democratic values, and justice for all minorities in this diverse world. **Black Lives matter!**" They voiced as they marched reminding us who we should be and to practice what we preach.

And does not these words of Mary's also resonate with us today:

“He has filled the hungry with good things
and the rich he has sent empty away.”

---Mary lived in our world at a time when 2 to 3 % of her country were rich and the rest lived on a subsistence level. Further, her country was under the dictatorship of the Roman government. Free expression was costly, and to dream openly for a democratic society where wealth opportunities were equalized, was treason. So was her Song, but she sang it, declaring that such a wealth imbalance must end.

Wealth inequality is as high here as it was then. One percent of our population controls nearly half of the financial wealth in our nation. The bottom 60% of our country have no financial wealth. They are, on average, in debt. Now with our pandemic shutdowns they will be quickly bankrupted. Our government must act immediately with another CARES Act, as effective as the 2.2 trillion relief that Congress passed in April.

But, finally, the theme from Mary’s song, that I think speaks to our moment in time, after this past election, is this:

He has shown the strength of his arm,
and put the arrogant to rout, along with their private schemes;
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted the lowly.

---What has occurred in this 2020 election is that our Democracy has prevailed! We don’t have a monarchy. Even though there are those, some in high places, calling for the President to declare a national emergency, to set aside the Constitution and invoke marshal law, and have the military conduct a new, and error free election – that lawlessness will not happen. Democracy has held! Dictatorial power has been brought down, and the demagogic behavior that this President has exhibited, beyond anyone who has held this office, was voted down. Make America Great Again didn’t happen, but America did prevail beyond Trumpism, and we will be stronger and better for it.

Our country doesn’t need a sense of bravado to be great. My dad always told his seven children, Pride cometh before a fall. Don’t be too proud, too arrogant. Needed is more humility, less conceit and cockiness. This is true for individuals and nations.

The United States participation in our common global efforts is of course necessary, it is in fact vital. But we serve the world best not by dictating the rules but by joining

in solidarity with other nations to battle poverty, insecurity, injustice in this earth, our common home.

We are the United States, struggling to worked together for a more perfect union within ourselves. Well, that should be our arrangement with all other countries around this world. Yes, especially with the United Nations and its caring agencies in all parts of this world. Who would ever thought that our Administration would stop funding the World Health Organization in the middle of a pandemic?

Historian, Heather Cox Richardson, who many of us follow daily, has written “President-Elect Joe Biden is making it clear he intends to rebuild the institutions and alliances that this administration has gutted.”

And Biden also said, “I am focused on getting the American public back at a place where they have some certainty, some surety, some knowledge that they can make it. The middle class and working-class people are being crushed. That's my focus for all Americans regardless of the political party” adding, the Presidency is not a partisan office, but demands care for all Americans.”

So, let each of us also show our care for our country, and for one another across the aisle, as Lincoln said, “With malice toward none, with charity for all. Let us bind up the wounds.”

---Tomorrow should be a plus day. The first shipments of the Covid-19 vaccine will be arriving. Let us rejoice! Amen.