

Tracy Daub  
12/2/18--University Presbyterian Church  
**Luke 1:46-55; Luke 21:25-36**

## THE TURNING

There is not a lot of room in the Protestant landscape for Jesus' mother Mary. While the Catholic tradition reveres Mary, and you will find her image in every Catholic Church, Mary is scarcely mentioned in Protestant congregations. It is only at Christmas time that she even makes the barest of appearances, and usually only as a figure in our nativity sets or on our Christmas cards. When we are invited to picture Mary, we often think of a young woman who was demure, passive, and serene.

But that is not the person we find in Luke's gospel. Luke gives us a description of Mary as a woman of great courage and faith. And the Mary we find in Luke's gospel has a lot to say. In her famous song called The Magnificat, Mary raises her voice to offer a bold and radical statement about God's activity in the world. In case you forgot what she said, let me refresh your memory. Mary proclaims, "God has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Her words are so audacious that three separate governments at some point in history actually banned the public recitation of Mary's Magnificat because its message was considered too subversive: first during the British rule of India when her song was prohibited from being sung in churches; then it was banned in Argentina in the 1970's during the rule of the military junta when the mothers of the people who had disappeared in government raids staged protests in the Plaza de Mayo and put words from the Magnificat on their posters; and again it was banned in Guatemala during the 1980's because the government found that Mary's words about God's preferential love for the

poor were stirring Guatemala's impoverished peoples to believe change was possible. So it is no exaggeration to state that Mary's words are revolutionary.

Mary sings this song not long after the angel Gabriel announces to her that she is to give birth to Jesus. Of course, we recall that Mary was a virgin, not yet married. And this news about her unwed pregnancy would have not only been miraculous but it would also have been scandalous in her society--even putting her at risk for public stoning. But Mary, while surprised by the angel's announcement, agrees to being what she calls, "the servant of the Lord." And soon after hearing this news she travels to see her relative Elizabeth who is herself pregnant with the child who will become John the Baptist. Elizabeth greets Mary and calls her "blessed among women." And that is when Mary bursts forth into this famous song we call the Magnificat because she begins with the words, "My soul *magnifies* the Lord." And Mary sings what is the longest monologue of any woman in the New Testament, a song in which she praises God and proclaims the radical thing God is doing in the world through the birth of the child she is carrying.

I find it interesting to note the grammar Mary uses here: because even though she is anticipating what God will do in the future, she uses the past tense, speaking of things God *has* done. So certain is she of the wondrous new thing God is doing, Mary can speak of it as though it has already occurred.

I also find it interesting to listen to *Jesus'* first words as he inaugurates his ministry. In Luke's gospel, Jesus' first act of ministry was to enter the synagogue and to read from the scroll of Isaiah. Listen to what Jesus says as he launches his public ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to

proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Does this not sound remarkably similar to the song his mother sang when she was pregnant with him? And I have to believe that Jesus' emphasis on bringing good news to the oppressed, the sick, the outcasts, the mistreated people in society, I have to believe that Jesus' concern for such people he learned from his mama--that bold woman who sang subversive songs. Maybe as a child he would be walking with his mother and they would see sick and disabled people who were excluded and scorned by those who believed them to be unclean or sinners. And maybe she would talk to her son about God's love and compassion for the least and the suffering. Or maybe they would be worshipping in the Temple and see the greed and corruption of the money changers exploiting the poor or the wealth of the community leaders while so many of the populous lived in grinding poverty, and she maybe she discussed with him God's call for justice. Or maybe as they walked through the region they would come upon the horrific sight of people hanging on crosses, public crucifixions carried out by the Romans as a means of terrorizing the people into submission, and maybe she discussed with Jesus about God's judgment against such cruelty. Maybe God chose Mary to be the "servant of the Lord" because God knew what kind of a mother she could be to the Messiah, helping him to grow up knowing God's care for the suffering and God's commitment to justice. Maybe God didn't pick Mary because she was passive and demure as we make her out to be, but because she was strong, and opinionated, and bold and God needed such qualities for Jesus' mama.

The song we sang as our first hymn today is called *The Canticle of the Turning*, and it is based on Mary's Magnificat. We will sing it each Sunday in Advent, adding a new verse each week. The song declares that with the coming of Jesus "the world is about to turn." In the Magnificat Mary declares the good news that there will be a great reversal of fortunes and

circumstances, a turning, where the lowly are lifted up and the powerful brought down, where the hungry are fed and the rich sent away empty.

Where would you welcome a reversal of fortunes in this world of ours? What would compel you to sing such a song as Mary's? Would it be about the racial injustice in our land that imperils young black men? Or would it be about the way the poor are punished for being poor, blamed for being poor, despised and demonized for being poor? Would your song be about desperate people fleeing poverty and violence in their homeland, compelled to make a dangerous journey northwards to a country that doesn't even welcome them? Would your song be about people whose factory closes up, leaving them jobless after decades of loyal service? Where would a reversal of circumstances sound like good news to you?

Now sometimes the difference between good news and bad news depends upon where you stand, or upon your bank account, or upon your skin color, or upon the place where you live. This radical reversal may not seem like such good news for those in power, for those who are wealthy, for those living in prosperity. But Mary's song about what God is doing in the world through the birth of Jesus is indeed good news. First, it is good news because it proclaims that God is not indifferent to human suffering. God sees. God cares. And God responds. God is on the side of justice. If you have ever had a wrong done to you, you may relate to wanting to see a reversal of circumstances, a righting of wrongs.

It is also good news for any of us who may be the ones needing to be brought down from our pedestals. A parent who witnesses one child acting unkindly toward another will intervene, in part to protect the child who is the target of unkindness, but also out of love for the one acting unkindly. The unkindness harms the perpetrator. The injustice damages the perpetrator. The selfishness injures the perpetrator. The good news is that God loves us too much to leave us in

our damaged state. God's reversal that Mary sings about is an act of judgment for sure, but it is a judgment rooted in love, a judgment that seeks to heal, and to transform us and our communities.

This Advent, we pause to recall why it is we welcome the birth of Jesus--and that is because this world and our lives know far too much darkness and we need a Savior. Advent is when we admit our longing for healing and transformation. We pray for God to come and turn us and our world around. Our Advent prayer is, "Jesus, turn us around!" And the way Jesus turns us around is with love. It is a love that stands in solidarity with the suffering. And it is a love that challenges the powerful. And it is a love that shows us all a better way of being.

And understanding this offers us a gift of hope. Our hope is not that the world will remain the same, but that God is turning the world around. Mary could see this and so she sang. She sang about the new orientation Jesus' birth would mean for us as individuals and for us as a community. And we are invited to sing Mary's song ourselves, by how we live our lives, reorienting ourselves to God's revolutionary love.