

“Make Way”
Michele Ward
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Luke 1:26-55
Truth & Consequences Sermon Series

Mary has a complex relationship with power. She says yes to the calling on her life against all the socioeconomic odds against her. She is an undereducated, unwed, unimportant colonized girl from Nazareth, a small town in Galilee. She is betrothed to marry an older man named Joseph from a respectable working class family. Mary of Nazareth does not sound like the type of person that will end up changing history by bearing Jesus Christ and bringing him into the created world. She sounds like a forgettable, ordinary girl from a rural community. And yet, that is what she does. Her yes to the angel Gabriel changes everything. It makes way for empires to crumble, for aristocrats to kneel, for the disenfranchised to step into what is theirs and the abandoned to find belonging. Mary is a radical person--we are witnessing not only the beginnings of the God-child in her story, but the birth of a prophet when we encounter her in the first chapter of Luke.

Mary didn't know where her yes would go. And she didn't jump into it right away. You see, Mary has a question or two for that angel Gabriel when he appears in her home, completely uninvited. When he shows up and shouts, "Greetings, favored one!" Mary might have been thinking to herself, "Who is this guy? Favored? Me? And the Lord is NOT with me. A strange, glowing stranger is here with me." He then goes on to tell her what's really happening, as if this encounter could become less bizarre after an introduction like that. Gabriel explains that Mary does not need to be afraid because she has found favor with God. Not only that, she will conceive and give birth to a boy. Now--this is most likely great news for Mary. God is going to bless her with a first born son, and his name will be Jesus. Perfect. Joseph will be so happy!

But Gabriel keeps going, telling Mary that this will not be her first son with Joseph, but Mary is having a baby with the Holy Spirit. He tells Mary that the Holy Spirit will come upon her, and God's power will overshadow her. Gabriel is dropping all kinds of news on Mary, and he isn't even close to done yet. Not only is Mary giving birth to the God-child her very old and barren cousin Elizabeth is also having a baby in a just a few more months. Gabriel ends this newsflash by telling Mary one more revelation: nothing is impossible

with God. She consents to all of this news, says yes to the gift of this impending pregnancy, and the angel disappears as quickly as he arrived.

Now, I don't want to give the impression that Mary went about this decision with peace and meekness; after all, she is still that unwed, undereducated, unimportant girl from Nazareth. She is still betrothed to one man and pregnant by God--like that will be easy to explain to her family and to Joseph. Luke tells us that she went with haste to Elizabeth's house. I like to imagine that Gabriel dropped this information because he wanted Mary to have a place to go, have someone to talk to about everything that's swirling inside of her head. Mary travels to Elizabeth's house, which would have taken her about a week. They minister to one another in beautiful ways during this encounter. They have one of the only women-centered conversations in the entire Bible that features women and is about women.¹ Most of the Bible is written by men, talks about men, and is a book that tells stories about women written by--you guessed it--men. So, a scene like this one is relieving to me. Finally! Two women get to talk to one another without a male centered focus! Now, some of you might disagree with me and say that they were talking about their babies, who would grow up to be men, so it doesn't count. But they are really talking to one another about what their bodies are experiencing, the changes that are occurring inside and around them, and the mysteries that await them.²

What happens next to Mary knocks the doubts from my mind that Mary is a God-vessel with no agency or was entirely preoccupied with men in her visit with Elizabeth. Mary's yes that I mentioned earlier echoes other moments of encounter that Old Testament prophets have with the Holy. I'm talking about Jeremiah, who claimed to be too young to speak. I'm talking about Moses, who was preoccupied with public speaking. I'm talking about Isaiah, who was worried about being too impure for God's purposes. Mary had her own, "who me?" moment when encountering the holy reality of God's call on her life. And yet, like all of those prophet before Mary and since, she said yes.

That yes is what leads her to burst out into one of the most famous prophetic songs in Scripture, no holds barred, and declare the kind of world that she sees. Mary has her own vision. This is not a vision that Gabriel gives on her behalf or that she reads from a scroll. This is a truth so strong that she cannot help but proclaim it with all of who she is--the truth that God is coming to change what we may think are impossible to change: oppressive systems and structures.

¹<https://viasophiaministry.com/2012/12/24/on-the-magnificat-feminist-ministry-and-the-kin-dom-of-god/>

²<https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/100/mary-and-feminist-movement>

Mary declares what kind of world God shapes. In the Greek, the Magnificat is in the past tense. This might seem odd because prophecies are meant to talk about the future, not the past. Perhaps that's the point. Perhaps Mary is prophesying about what she sees has already happened in the future, what is truly to come. Perhaps Mary lifts up this vision of the proud scattered, the lowly lifted, the hungry fed, to declare what is coming when we make way for God's justice. Mary's prophecy does not take the roles and switch who has the power and who does not. Rather, the social order equalizes in her vision. There is no need to replicate the system that was previously in place by giving the keys to new people and taking them away from others. That would just perpetuate the same patterns with new faces in the seats of power. What if we aren't even using the tools that we thought we needed for the task? What if the systems that we need are so different from what we currently believe that only a Mary kind of vision can bring us clarity?

Mary is talking about creating something entirely new, and not only about giving birth to the Son of God. She is talking about a new social order. Another group of people who created a piece of Mary's prophecy on earth also gave birth to something holy in the month of December, but it was 17 years ago, not thousands.

A few years ago I had the privilege of visiting a community in Portland, Oregon called Dignity Village. It is a transitional living tiny house community for people who previously experienced homelessness, but it started as a protest encampment called Camp Dignity. Activists and people sleeping in all sorts of places lived in tents underneath an overpass for months until the City of Portland came to an agreement with the people participating in the Camp Dignity movement. They created a 501(c)3 and occupy a parcel of land that the city allows them to lease. It isn't unique for a transitional housing community to start or to be a registered nonprofit. What is unique is their governance and their commitment to an equalizing structure. They saw the truth of the systems that had left many of them isolated, misunderstood, and ill. They had run into the limits of mental health support, recovery houses, and government assistance programs. They knew they needed to advocate for themselves in order for the wider Portland community to take them seriously as citizens and treat them like human beings.

No one was going to restore their dignity for them. They had to do it themselves. They created their own council which is run by social workers and Dignity Village residents. They have their own security detail that keeps Dignity Village secure 24 hours a day. They have a zero tolerance policy for violence, drugs, alcohol, or disruptive behavior. The tiny home owners have jobs off site,

run micro-business enterprises, are going back to school, and successfully petitioned for better bus routes for their residents. They even run an emergency winter shelter when the city's own shelters overflow.

What I experienced there was something I had not felt or seen to that degree before: deep pride and love in the community that they had created against the odds. One of the residents gave our group a tour, showed us her home, the community center full of books, couches, and a small computer lab. She told us proudly of their community garden, their solar panels, and the peace and safety she experienced there. She shared with us a vision of the future, like Mary. But this time, it had already happened. It had happened before our group arrived that day, and it is still happening now.

This is the Dignity Village version of the Magnificat: "We came out of the doorways of Portland's streets, out from under the bridges, from under the bushes of public parks, we came openly with nothing and no longer a need to hide as Portland's inhumane and Draconian camping ban had just been overturned on two constitutional grounds. We came armed with a vision of a better future for ourselves and for all of Portland, a vision of a green, sustainable urban village where we can live in peace and improve not only the condition of our own lives but the quality of life in Portland in general. We came in from the cold of a December day and we refuse to go back to the way things were."³

After receiving a vision of what the world could look like, the founders of Dignity Village could not go back to the way things were before. They said yes to a risky endeavor that changed the Portland conversation around homelessness. Mary could not go back to the way things were after her encounter with gabriel and her visit with Elizabeth. Mary gives us a vision of the world as it should be--it is this vision of the world that gives us the fuel to make way for God's justice.

I dare you to pull a Mary. Say your yes.

Come in from that December day and refuse to go back to the way things were.

³www.dignityvillage.org