

The Expectant Prophet
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Luke 1:39-56

I have a feeling Mary told the story of travelling to her elder cousin Elizabeth's house stories to Jesus, much like I have told my daughter and son the stories of what happened in the days before they were born.

Our oldest was two weeks late, and I remember my mother in law Rita calling me on the phone every day of those two weeks asking if I was in labor yet. Every time I responded "no, mom" she took me to the mall and made me walk a few laps. She was certain the walking would help. When our daughter Cady was finally born, she was so big that my mother Kathy took one look at her and asked if she should run out and get her a cheeseburger.

Our youngest was right on time, scheduled to arrive on a Tuesday. I remember working right up until 5 pm the day before, certain that the marketing agency where I worked could not possibly survive without me. I was wrong. After little baby Zack and I came home from the hospital, Cady waited about a day before she asked when we were going to take him back.

I've got more birth stories, and yes, both my long-suffering children groan and roll their eyes when I tell them.

Maybe Jesus did, too. *"Jesus, I just have to tell you this story again, the story of how you were conceived, how you were born,"* Mary would say. *"Again?"* Jesus responded. *"Yes, again."* said Mary.

She tells him how she set out on her first journey, traveling alone, like every prophet before her, out to her cousin Elizabeth's summer house in order to declare her agenda. She tells him how she gave birth in a barn, how she lay him down among the animals, and how she welcomed weathered shepherds in the middle of the night. Maybe those stories helped Jesus see the world, and understand who he was and who he needed to be.

There would be more journeys ahead: to Bethlehem; to Egypt and back again; to Jerusalem when Jesus is twelve; and back again.

Like any good Jewish mother would, Mary told Jesus stories of their faith, how Abram and Sarai were picked by God to begin the covenant, how God was forever choosing the younger child over the oldest, how Moses stuttered and how Ruth made a way of no way. She told him how God had chosen their people again and again instead of mighty Babylon with its wealth and hanging gardens or impressive Egypt with its powerful pharaohs and towering pyramids.

Mary sat her son on her lap and reminded him that the mighty and powerful would be on the losing side of history if their wealth and power were their only comfort in this life. They might gain the whole world, but if in so doing they forfeited their own souls, they'd be sent packing.

I imagine she was determined, holy and strong. She'd have to be, to be what our Christian Orthodox brothers and sisters call the Theotokos – the God-Bearer. After she welcomed the message from Gabriel that she would carry God's own son, she welcomed the most radical upending the social order. A world in which older women get pregnant against all odds, and young virgins do too. Because nothing is impossible for God!

Age clearly doesn't matter to God! There's a lesson for us. As a youth, you might be called to serve God in a surprising capacity; or you might be getting up there in years and think that your years of valuable contributions are over. Watch out! The value of your gift is not determined by your age, but by how God chooses to use you.

The Magnificat is an odd song for a young mother to sing. It is actually one of the oldest poems in the Hebrew bible, one that Hannah sang when she found out that she was pregnant with Samuel. It proclaimed the radical reversals that would take place in God's kingdom. *"God would scatter the proud in the imaginings of their hearts. God would bring down the powerful. The rich will go away empty. The hungry and lowly will be lifted up."* All will be turned upside down.

Mary's song foretold the ministry and vocation of her son. Remember Jesus' words in Luke 4:18 in the synagogue? *"The Spirit of the lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; to make the blind to see; to set the captive and oppressed free."* Jesus turned out to be the One who would fulfill the prophetic words of his mother.

In their book, *"The First Christmas,"* John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg argue that the nativity story is *"not simply tidings of comfort and joy, the gospel stories of Jesus' birth are also edgy visions of another way of life, confronting the status quo and demanding personal and political transformation."* (SoMa Review/Interview with John Spalding)

In Jesus, God said I am doing a radically new thing. I am coming to you so that you can see who I am – in the flesh, up close, personal, grounded in the world I created. Jesus was the ultimate reversal in God's order – Divinity came in human form. If we accept the words of Mary's song, if we accept the coming of the Christ child into our lives, we too are receiving into ourselves God's vision for the world – a world that currently and clearly is NOT the way it's supposed to be.

It is quite surprising and discomfoting that the prophetic words of the Magnificat are set in the middle of the beautiful story we tell each Christmas. We sneak around it though because frankly it does not fit into the lovely manger scene we construct with the angels floating above and doughy shepherds stable – side with a few wise men traveling with gifts.

Mary's song challenges us to take risks. To be a radically loving people who take personal risks and risks as a community. To live a life of mercy, springing from the love of God. And I need that right now. Can we even recall what it feels like know mercy? To feel mercy toward others? To extend mercy? Well, even if we can't, God does. There's the promise. Thank you, Mary.

She could see it with startling clarity. In the kingdom of God's Son, all the wrongs that produced the perpetually poor and the perennially invisible would be righted. All the injustices under which people suffer now would be ironed out in a righteousness that would cover the whole earth.

Mary could see it clear as day. The question for all of us is: "Do we still see this, too?"

The world is full of massive injustice—of powerful people subjecting the majority to their whims, of hungry children dying every day. There are people who question how anyone can believe in a God who would allow, or worse, cause injustice like this. There are people who question how anyone can ever do anything meaningful to combat such injustice when it is ingrained in the very structures in which we live.

But then there is Mary—a self-described “lowly” servant, carrying a tiny little baby, born in the little no-name town of Bethlehem. Mary—who praises God and chooses to do God’s will.

There are a lot of “big” problems that we cannot dare to solve on our own, small and insignificant as we are. But Mary’s song reminds us to never give up hope.

We need only to follow our merciful and mighty God who comes among us in the tiniest, most imperceptible of ways, favoring the small, the weak, the lowly, and promising faithfulness from generation to generation.

We need only serve and trust that justice, as only our merciful God can conceive of it, is being worked out one baby, one generation, one moment at a time.

What if we learned to sing Mary’s song instead of wallowing in indifference? What if we sang her song instead of closing our mouths because we are too fearful to speak up? Mary beckons people everywhere to speak out for God’s justice, which is soon to be born into this world. That might make our world a different place, a better place, a place where we might even catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

Sing Mary’s song. And maybe, just maybe, mercy will abound again. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.