

The Fear of Being Ridiculed
Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

I have always admired Mary, the mother of Jesus. Ok, to be honest, I have always been dazzled by the fuss and attention Mary receives this time of year. She always gets the best costume in the pageant. And the best portraiture. And the best music. I look forward to any excuse to read, teach, and preach about Mary. A recent Sunday School class began with people sharing their thoughts about Mary. People answered that Mary was “faithful,” “holy,” “a mother.” One person also responded, “brave.”

Mary’s bravery is probably my favorite quality of hers. Despite the imaginations of Renaissance artists, Mary was very likely closer to 13 years old, a young girl barely into her child-bearing years. She was engaged to Joseph, who was probably about a decade older, as was the custom of the Jewish people at that time. Life expectancy being what it was, a 13 year old was much closer to adulthood than present day. I’ve always believed Mary to be brave based on the pronouncement of the Angel Gabriel. A very young woman, not yet wed, and a first pregnancy under miraculous circumstances—Mary risks great ridicule from her community. When I was 13, my greatest fear was that my friends would ridicule me for not having the right outfit on. Mary is facing pressure from Heaven and Earth and bravely says, “let it be with me according to your word.”

We have been exploring the hopes, and related fears that are expressed during Advent. Last week, we sat with Zechariah’s fear that he would be disappointed by God. Today we wonder with Mary, in what ways might others ridicule me for my actions, even when those actions are divinely ordered by God? Despite being called “highly favored” by an angel of the Lord, I can imagine the gossip that spread through her small village—the snickers and quick “shh-shhh” sound of other women gathered at the well to fetch water. Or the people, once considered Mary’s friends, who would mumble a greeting on the street while avoiding eye-contact.

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Mary risks even more ridicule later in the story, when she greets her cousin Elizabeth. Upon receiving her cousin's embrace, Mary sings a song—not a lullaby, or love song, but a song of protest. Mary's magnificat, also as famous as Mary herself, *both announces and foreshadows the protest that is the coming kingdom of God.*¹ "God has shown strength with his arm," Mary sings, "and has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. [Luke 1: 51-53].

Sometimes our ears are so dulled by the other sounds of Advent and Christmas that we forget that the birth of Jesus is the birth of a new world order. Not only will lions and lamb lie down together (as Isaiah foretold), the poor and the hungry will be fed, while the rich and powerful will go home empty-handed. To me, that is the more ludicrous message of Mary's story. Doesn't she know the rich always win? Even in the pandemic, which ushered in an economic crisis not seen on this scale since the Great Depression, the world's billionaires got richer. According to one news source, over a roughly seven-month period starting in mid-March – a week after President Donald Trump declared a national emergency – America's 614 billionaires grew their net worth by a collective \$931 billion.² Meanwhile, 40 million Americans could lose their home if the Federal moratorium on evictions expires.³ Miraculous conception aside, the unbelievable truth of the birth of Jesus is that things might get better for the least of these.

Like other songs in the Bible, Mary sings to both past faithfulness, present reality, and future hope. Throughout the course of human history, God has continually raised up prophets, activists, and organizers who have held the powerful to account and fed the hungry. Many times, these prophets, activists,

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/why-do-christians-protest>

² <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2020/12/01/american-billionaires-that-got-richer-during-covid/43205617/>

³ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-40-million-americans-lose-homes-congress-evictions/>

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and organizers have been young women, who were ridiculed (and may be still ridiculed) for their tireless work for justice. In 1960, six-year-old Ruby Bridges was the first African-American child to desegregate the all-white William Frantz Elementary School in Louisiana. And there were dozens of white people, many of whom proclaimed to be Christian, who loudly ridiculed this little girl to her face while she was escorted to school. More recently, **Malala Yousafzai** has been an outspoken advocate for human rights and female education. At the age of 12, she and some school friends were shot by the Taliban, simply because they were girls who had the audacity to seek education. Greta Thunberg, age 17, is a climate activist. She has and continues to be ridiculed on social media for her work advocating for the environment.

Do we dare join our voices with powerless and dare to sing and work for justice? Do we dare risk ridicule and rejection by standing with the marginalized, and not the powerful? Mary's protest song is one of the earliest vehicles for the gospel. It announces that Jesus is king and Herod is not. She rejoices in the proud being scattered, the powerful brought down, the lowly lifted up, the hungry fed, and the rich sent away empty. The Magnificat is a song of political revolution.⁴

Earlier this year, when I was yearning for a new song to sing in the midst of this year of upheaval, I encountered an older song by Tracy Chapman, in what I consider to be a modern Magnificat. She sings:

*Don't you know
They're talkin' 'bout a revolution
It sounds like a whisper*

*While they're standing in the welfare lines
Crying at the doorsteps of those armies of salvation
Wasting time in the unemployment lines
Sitting around waiting for a promotion*

⁴ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/why-do-christians-protest>

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*Don't you know
They're talkin' 'bout a revolution
It sounds like a whisper
Poor people gonna rise up
And get their share
Poor people gonna rise up
And take what's theirs
'Cause finally the tables are starting to turn...⁵*

The tables are starting to turn because the world is about the turn. Sing with Ruby, Malala, Greta, and Mary; sing with the people who wait in line for hours for a food distribution box. Sing, and if you can't sing, maybe whisper. Don't you know, she's talking bout a revolution.

Amen.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=721JQZw6Spg>