



Date: December 4, 2016

Title: "Mary's Song"

Scripture: Luke 1:39-55

Description: In response to the news that she shall bear a child, Mary sings. Her song speaks of turning the world upside down, with the thrones being cast down, the poor being fed while the rich are sent away empty. How is this good news to any of us who are not poor?

The Blessed Virgin Mary. She receives Gabriel's message that she shall bear a child with the response, "Be it unto me according to your word." In other words, "Okay by me." This has led Biblical scholars through history to portray her as submissive, compliant, passive. (Of course, these scholars through history have mostly been male.)

But look at the story itself and you'll find a different Mary: in the early months of pregnancy she travels seventy miles from Nazareth to the Judean hill country, with no sign of Joseph at her side, let alone a donkey to help her cover the distance. Then listen to the song she composes when she arrives. It's a song of reversal and transformation, a song of revolutionary upheaval. The music sounds like this (Queen's *We Will, We Will Rock You*) The words sound like this: "[God] 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." (v. 52-53)

What's she singing about? This is not *Kum Ba Ya* or *Jesus Loves Me* Unless you're on welfare, this song sounds more like a threat than a promised blessing from God? "[God] 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." (v. 52-53)

Maybe she's singing about herself. Maybe she's saying, "I am the hungry one, and God has filled me up with a baby who's growing in my womb. And all those who thought they had an exclusive patent on God and God was theirs to describe and control are out of luck. Little old insignificant me, I'm the blessed-by-God one!" Maybe.

Maybe she's not only the mother of Jesus but is also the precursor of Jesus. In Jesus, God comes down from a heavenly throne and become lowly and fills the hungry with good things. Maybe.

But remember who and where we are.] We have a vested interest in believing Mary's words are personal and theological. If you're anywhere near rich, how do you feel good about "[God] 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."

Every one of us can think of somebody who has more money than we do. But I think we'd have a hard time convincing Mary of our status as being poverty-stricken. How is this opening song to Luke's story of Christ good news to us if we're rich. Or whether we're rich or poor?

I'm going to break down a possible answer into four parts of a conversation. I'd like to encourage you to have this conversation with someone this week, and maybe with several someones during the weeks before Christmas this year. Start with someone you like and are comfortable with. As you gain courage that comes from practice, try having the conversation with someone coming from a different place, someone with a lot more or a lot less status than you, someone who has had greater or less success, somebody who's a lot older or a lot younger, maybe even someone who didn't vote the way you did. Here are the four parts of the conversation I'd like for you to have:

- Tell me about the ways in which you are rich.
- Tell me about the ways in which you are poor.
- Let me tell you about the ways in which I am poor.
- Let me tell you about the ways in which I am rich.*

That's it. Four parts of a single conversation. Do you have the courage to try it with someone this coming week? The conversation can go in entirely different directions, depending on who you're having it with. If the person is making minimum wage and buried under student loans, you're probably going hear a lot about how they are poor. Listen to them, because you have something to learn. But also push them to tell you the ways they are rich. I'll bet that what you then say about yourself will be shaped about what the other person has said about themselves. Because we really do have a lot in common underneath the surface.

Let me offer an example of how such a conversation may go. (Two characters take their places, the rich one's following lines are in this orangey color, the poor friend's words are in this blue.

“So, friend, it’s good to talk with you. I was wondering, tell me about how you are rich.”

“I appreciate you asking about the ways I am rich, because not many people can see that about me. Thanks for seeing me beneath the first impression. I grew up poor, with a tough childhood, but that’s what brought me close to some friends who remain close years later. I was a loner in school, but I learned how to read people and be aware of how they’re hurting and reach out to them. I never had much money, but somehow that’s made me more willing to share when someone need a hand, and to remember that there’s always been someone to help me when I’m in a rough place.”

“Tell me about the ways in which you are poor,”

“I’m glad you risked the awkwardness of that question. Because it’s obvious I have a tough time paying the rent and don’t have medical insurance and can only find part-time work. But the real way I feel poor is when I see a person who’s a lot worse off than me and I feel powerless to help them. I feel poor when I reach out to someone who’s new to this country and trying to make a fresh start and I can’t speak enough of their language to be of much use to them. The real times I feel poor are when I think of my sister who died when I was six and she was just 19 and I miss her with more sadness than I have in my whole heart.”

May I tell you about the ways in which I am poor?”

“Please. I’d never imagined you as poor.”

“My brother was the gifted one and I was the unexpected surprise. I always felt like I should have apologized for being born. Sometimes I think the stuff I own and the stuff I’ve accomplished are just ways of me saying, ‘Please pay attention to me and approve of me.’ So now I have a lot, but still It’s very hard for me to believe anyone truly likes me or enjoys me.”

“But I’m also rich, just not in ways you’d guess. I’ve always loved to read. Sometimes reading can help me escape for hours or sometimes reading energizes me with new ideas. And I love to run, although most days my knees have turned that into ‘I love to walk.’ When I do that, so much of the stress just melts away.”

By then, you’ve covered the four questions. But maybe by then, you don’t want to stop, so you choose to take it another level.

“You’ve told me about how you’re rich. Let me tell you about how you’re rich. You’re rich because you don’t have to spend every waking moment earning money so

you have time to enjoy reflecting about things and to walk beside people who are in trouble.”

“You’ve told me about how you’re rich. Let *me* tell you about how you’re rich. You’re rich because your laugh is infectious and fun to be around. You’re rich because every child in this church loves to give you a hug. And you’re rich because you’ve already been through so much of the worst that life can bring so you can live pretty much without fear.”

In some ways the poor have access to wealth that money cannot buy, and they are often willing to share that wealth. In some ways every prosperous man or woman also carries a world of hurt and it hurts even more to keep it a secret. Both are part of being human. In the birth of Christ, God sees and touches the rich and the poor in each of us, rich or poor.

Go home and ask yourself, “Are you allowing Mary’s song of joy and hope to sing a song through you?” Through your poverty and through the ways you are rich, can you let God turn your life into Mary’s song? Can you see those things in another, and help them see as well?

Poverty is a mask we put on people that covers up their real wealth. And wealth is a skin we put on people to disguise their deep poverty. Once we label a person as rich, we grow blind to their poverty. Once a person falls in the “poor” category, we lose any vision of their deep riches.

“[God] 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.” (v. 52-53) Turns out Mary is talking about us. God sees right through our riches into our poverty. And God observes our poverty and sees past it to our deep riches.

Look for the riches in any person you know, and bless them with your affirmations. When you notice a person’s poverty, remember to treat them gently and bring them before God mercifully. When you’re all too aware of your own poverty, make that your personal prayer of confession. When you become aware of your richness, stop long enough to offer thanksgiving.

Make Mary’s song the transforming moment of your Christmas season. Make her song the way you redefine your own wealth and come to grips with your own poverty. Have that sacred conversation with someone this advent. Have that conversation with God every day. We call that prayer. This month, close your prayers

with the request, "Lord, turn me into Mary's song. Sing a song of joy and hope through me." Then turn your prayer into a conversation.

This sermon was inspired by and adapted from the Epilogue in *Nazareth Manifesto*, by Samuel Wells, published by Wiley and Sons Ltd in 2015.

Americans are deeply divided about what is wrong with our nation; Americans are deeply divided about what needs to be done. A new President has been elected. Approximately half of Americans are celebrating the change that is promised; half of Americans are in tears. I want to speak this morning to both halves. I want to speak about power: first about fear of those in power, then about exercising power.

If you weep and are afraid, read Psalm 37. Read it again. Read it until you can repeat it word for word. When you are afraid, let Psalm 37 show you how to respond.

There are four verbs in the opening of this Psalm. The first is "Do not fret." When I am afraid, it feels like the boogey-man has taken over the entire world. When I'm in pain, it feels like the hurt will last forever. "The grass withers and the flower fades," says scripture.

Years ago, when my children were very young, I grew so weary parenting and of the needs and demands which had engulfed my life. A wise counsellor made this promise: "There will come a day when you will go shopping and you will no longer know what aisle the diapers are on." "No way!" I thought. "Never!" But that is exactly what happened. "For they will fade like grass." (Psalm 37:2)

The deep truth is this: the crisis today is a thunderstorm, with wind and hail and lightning. But it is only a storm; the climate is life. In the history of the world, every night so far has been followed by day.

"Take delight in the LORD" says v. 4. When we're afraid, we tend to become blind to all the goodnesses of life. Don't let that which threatens you blind you to the beauties of life. If you spent last week weeping, look around.

The day after he was released from the hospital, I had breakfast with my dear friend. It had been a rough time in the hospital—the treatment was unpleasant and had lasted two days longer than expected. The doctor was not hopeful. My friend himself told me he didn't think he had much time left. He was very old, and about worn out, and the cancer was spreading.

At breakfast, he dunked his sweet roll into his coffee. "I love the sweet rolls and coffee in this place!" he exclaimed. "And when I finish breakfast, I'm going over to the club to shave and shower. My club has the best showers in town!"

He didn't have much time left, and he rarely felt good towards the end, but he delighted in the tiny goodnesses of life. At the last, when he couldn't even have sweet rolls and coffee and the best shower in town, he still had the memory of those things, and he took delight in the memories.

"When you're hurting or afraid, do this," says the Bible. "Take delight in the LORD." Remember to the last moment that life still has beauty and meaning.

"Trust in the Lord," says the Psalm. (v. 3, 5) You don't have to fix this all at once. You don't have to fix it at all. "Commit your way to the Lord and *he* will act." Trust in the Lord. God is in control. God will make things turn out the way they need to turn out.

But that doesn't mean that we are to do nothing. "Trust in the Lord *and do good.*" If you are afraid the new administration will wreak havoc and harm in the world, then you go out there and do some good in your world. Those who have been elected to office have the power to govern, but we, the people, maintain the power to set the tone.

Jesus did not own a weapon, hold office, or manage a single hedge fund, but he possessed amazing power. You follow in his steps. You can wield tremendous influence. "You shall receive power," Jesus told his small, frightened band. "and your power will spread throughout the world." It's time for you to lead the way.

A young single mother, recently widowed, found herself chatting with a middle-aged man named Norm. "My only son took an overdose of drugs and died," the soft-spoken man said as they leaned against a chain-link fence that surrounded the Little League baseball park. "It tore my wife up completely." Tears brimmed in his kind eyes. "In fact, she couldn't stand it. She took her own life." After a moment's effort to compose himself, he add, "I'm sure they're both with the Lord. They were the churchgoers in the family. I didn't go much. But I kind of felt that God was telling me not to crumple up under my load. A few weeks after my wife's death, I found myself walking down toward this ball park one afternoon. Since then, I've given all my spare time helping these kids learn how to shag flies, hit and throw curve balls, run bases. He grinned a little. "Don't know how much I'm helping them, but they sure do help me."

When you're wrestling with that one-two combo of fear and desolation, look for some way to do good. You can make a difference. Don't underestimate what Jesus meant when he said, "You shall receive power."

Let's talk about what to do with that power. There are four ways that influence is exerted. Think of them as the four corners of a square. These ways operate in every group: in the U.S. Capital, in this church, in your business or school, around your family Thanksgiving dinner table.

The first way is that of the Spokesperson. This is someone who is good with words, a figurehead who can talk with people, inspire people and gain their trust. When you think of civil rights, you think of Dr. Martin Luther King; when you think of the apartheid struggle, you think of Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela.

The Spokesperson recognizes the unspoken values and agenda of people and gives them a name and a voice. A spokesperson stands as a beacon on a hill, giving identity and cohesion.

You can be a spokesperson. You don't have to be a great orator; you don't have to be the pastor whose name is on the sign out front. You have opportunities to speak up for your faith, for your values. Use those opportunities. Speak up for goodness. "You shall receive power," Jesus told his small but faithful band. And your power will spread throughout the world. It's time for you to lead, maybe your influence should be as a Spokesperson.

The second form of power is that of the Chair. The Chairman of the Board, the Chairperson of the Committee, the organizer of the family—the chairperson ensures that things get done, deadlines are met, obligations are fulfilled. In a business, the project gets completed, the right people get hired and then they get paid on time. In a family, the bills get paid, the cars are insured, and dinner gets on the table.

If the spokesperson's job is about inspiration, the chairperson's job is about stability and trust. In short, this person needs to be a grown-up. You want a chair to be a safe, reliable, competent pair of hands. However much you may admire someone, if they're always losing checks or forgetting appointments or constantly late for meetings, they may offer lots of charisma, but you're not going to want them in charge for long.

Are you dismayed about the results of the election? Then find a place to contribute good to your world and offer to serve. Are you pleased about our new President-elect? Then find a place to contribute to positive change and get on board. Serve as a Chairperson, not as an audience. "You shall receive power", said Jesus. It's time to exercise that power.

The third form of power is that of Facilitator. The chair leads from the front; the facilitator leads from the back. The facilitator is like the coach, constantly going round the team to have a quiet word with each one, working out how to get the best out of

them and how to get the right combination to release the energy in the group. This person remembers everybody's birthday, notices when someone is missing from the group, turns conflict into opportunities for growth. The Chair makes you feel everything's under control; the Facilitator makes you feel like you're important, that you have a contribution to make.

You're an introvert and meeting strangers is right up there with a trip to the dentist. A Facilitator calls to say, "How about bringing a box of cookies and serving them to folks who are voting at the church this week?" It turns out to be a highlight of your week. A facilitator sees your strengths you didn't know you had.

Basic truth: you are far more aware of your weaknesses than I am. I am more aware of your strengths than you are. A Facilitator sees those strengths and brings them out.

The fourth kind of power lies with what I call an Epitome. This is the person who represents all that's good about an organization. You don't have to explain your faith stands and what you believe; you just point to that person and say, "That's what I'm talking about."

Two words: "Mother Teresa." She was not exceptionally articulate, she did not hold an official title, but her heart pulsed with the lifeblood of the people she serve and with the values she held. And her influence was world-wide. "You shall receive power." Do not underestimate the power and influence of a person who embodies values and connects them with living.

Be careful. There are dangers in each form of power. A Spokesperson runs the risk of acquiring a huge ego. "All eyes fixed on me" is an intoxicating experience. A Chairperson may become greedy for control. A Facilitator may grow to need everyone to like him and lose himself in the process. The Epitome may feel pressure to appear perfect and become unable to show weakness.

In fact, you want your leader to have weaknesses, because that's when the people have an opportunity to step up and make a difference. This makes us all stronger. Jesus did not say, "Your *leader* shall receive power." He promised, "*You* shall receive power." You. (A better translation would be "*You-all*", because we all need each other.) "And you-all shall be witness to me.." Step-by-growing step, your influence will spread world-wide.

If you don't like the way things are going down, go out there and do something. If you think the world is headed in the wrong direction, go turn the world around. "You shall receive power," Jesus said, not "you shall receive a crying towel."

If you believe our health care system is broken, call the Good Sam Center in Norcross, a place that provides medical services to people who can't pay full price. Tell them you'd like to help.

If you think our educational system is in disarray, contact your local school. Not the private school where you spend \$10K a year for tuition, but the near-by school where half the kids qualify for free lunch. Call the Guidance Counsellor there and offer an hour or two a week helping a kid learn to read.

You have a greater responsibility than to cast your vote every four years and spend the time in between complaining. Those of us who listen to talk radio and forward messages to ten friends, how's that working so far? "You shall receive power." Exercise your power. Use your influence. Speak up, take charge, offer support and encouragement, put your values into practice.

"In Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth." Change a life, change a community, change America, change the world. It's time to step up. Exercise the power God has given you. Exert your influence. Lead the way. Amen.