

Mary's Story

by Rev. Sharon Lee MacArthur

For Berkeley Chinese Community Church

December 23, 2018 • Fourth Sunday of Advent/Christmas Sunday • 11 am

Bilingual Service, interpreter: Virginia Sung

Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

⁴⁶ And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, ⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'



Merry Christmas Sunday! We're celebrating the birth of baby Jesus two days early! We've lit all the Advent candles – we've lit the Christ candle!

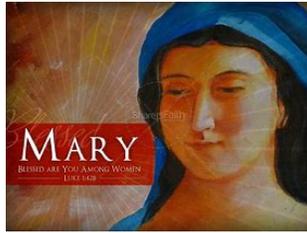


The baby's here! It's all about the baby once the baby is born! But THIS baby born over 2,000 years ago is so special that he changes everything – he is the central figure of Christianity, a religion that is claimed by 2.2 billion people as theirs.

This baby – Mary's baby Jesus, grew up to model a way of life and love that was all embracing; he modeled compassion and justice available to all regardless of one's station in life that he or she is born into or lived into.

His values were not the usual earthly values – **His** values reflected an "upside down, inside out" view of the world that angered and bewildered many. BUT he was the hope of the poor, the oppressed, those who felt hopeless, those who were relegated to the margins of society.

AND if we look closely at today's scripture reading - we have a clue about how Jesus got that way – his mother!



So, today it's all about Mary, Mother of Jesus – Today it's Mary's Story!



We pick up the story as told by Luke after God sent the angel Gabriel to visit Zechariah – a priest and the husband of Mary's cousin Elizabeth. The Angel informed him that he would be a father. Remember? Zechariah questioned Gabriel because he couldn't believe that as old as he and his wife were, they could become parents. And because of his doubts, the angel rendered him mute.



Then God sent Gabriel to visit Mary in Nazareth and announced to her that she was going to have a baby, God's baby, and this baby would do great things. Luke's narrative tells us that Mary is perplexed and wondered how this can be since she is a virgin. This is when the angel tells her the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth who are expectant parents even though they are so old. In other words, nothing is impossible with God!

And Mary's response? 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' It didn't take much to convince her – that nothing is impossible with God!

Let's not forget that Mary is a child – she's 13! 13 year – olds today are probably still in middle school - maybe the 8th grade! But 2,000 years ago – in Nazareth – 13 year old Mary was engaged to a man named Joseph – probably arranged by the families. And during the year or so of engagement – each would be preparing for their new life together.

Mary was probably learning to make a home for her family to be – maybe working on cooking – or sewing – or cleaning – those tasks that a wife and mother would need to know.



And somehow, somewhere in her upbringing, her parents – Joachim and Anna, had instilled in Mary absolute trust in God...even to entertain the impossible – that she,



Mary, a child, a virgin – could be the mother of God's child.
And more, importantly – the mother of a child of the God that Mary loved and lived for. AND just who is this God?

She describes God in her song...the song that we know as “The Magnificat” - the song she sings after she goes to visit her several generations older pregnant cousin Elizabeth...



the song she sings after Elizabeth tells her that she, Mary, is blessed among women and blessed is the child she is carrying...

How did she know that? Well - Elizabeth had felt her own child leap for joy within her as soon as Mary and her baby arrived.

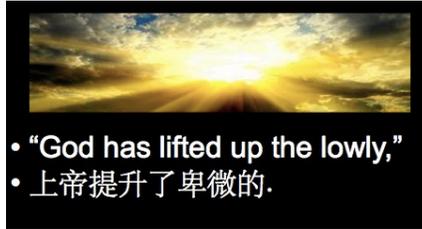


AND **that's** when Mary sings her song...beginning with “My soul magnifies the Lord”! What follows is an articulation of a kind of upside down, inside out kind of worldview that we know through Jesus.

In Mary's words – this is what God has shown her –



"God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,



God has lifted up the lowly; ⁵³



God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.



⁵⁴ God has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy"

And let's not forget that Israel is occupied territory – it is not free - the Israelites were looking for someone to deliver them from their Roman rulers, remember?



This is the God that Mary knows. This is the God that Mary passes onto her baby – even in utero!

You probably know that babies in utero are amazing! How many of us can remember feeling a baby kick for the first time and how strong an elbow can be?

A baby can begin to hear sounds at about 17 weeks, about the time that the mother begins to feel the baby's first flutters of movement and even before the baby's sex is clearly identifiable.

By 26 weeks, the baby's heartbeat will speed up in response to sounds, including music, that come from outside the womb.

At 33 weeks, babies have been observed breathing in time to music. By 38 weeks, a baby in the womb reacts differently to various types of music, showing different rates of movement. Babies can hear and respond to music – studies have shown all that!

I recently read an article entitled “How to Teach a Baby in the Womb” by Kirstin Hendrickson. She writes, “A growing body of research suggests that infants can learn while they’re still in utero. In fact, while this phenomenon was once thought limited to their ability to sense their environments, the rising field of epigenetics now suggests that it’s possible to condition infants with deeply engrained traits as appetite and food preferences.”

I didn’t even know there was such a field as epigenetics, did you? – I had to look it up – it’s the study of cellular and physiological trait variations that are caused by external or environmental factors.

Hmmm, so babies in utero can learn! I remember when I was pregnant for the first time - I read up on what to expect, what to do, how to provide an environment conducive to a happier child, a smarter child, a more creative child.



I remember some of my pregnant friends reading Shakespeare aloud to their unborn child or



singing special music to start grooming their kids - you get the idea!



So – I wonder if the pregnant Mary did that too? Did she sing “The Magnificat” again and again to Jesus and to the world before he was born? Did she tell him “God stories?” Did she begin to train him even before birth? My guess is that she did – My guess is that THAT is why God chose Mary – God already knew how devoted she is...God already knew that her soul did indeed magnify the Lord – and that magnification was just what was needed to bring to life all of God’s hopes!

So knowing all of that – have we really listened to the words of what Mary sang? Edward Markquardt reminds us that The Magnificat is also known as “Mary’s Song.” He observes that usually, when any of us hears it, we don’t realize how radical and revolutionary the song really is.

During the Christmas season we hear a lot of beautiful music – among them the Magnificat – it is beautiful set to music - do we really listen to the words?

When we hear the words read we can be captivated by the beauty of poetic cadence. So, We don’t pay attention to what is actually being sung or said. AND I, for one, plead guilty as charged.

BUT Biblical scholars pay attention to the words – to the concepts, to the messages being communicated. AND these scholars concluded that the Magnificat is one of the most revolutionary documents available.



- E. Stanley Jones, a famous preacher of two generations ago, said that the Magnificat is “the most revolutionary document in the world.”
- Murrow, another theologian, talks about the “revolutionary germ” found in the Magnificat.
- Barclay, an English theologian whose entire set of commentaries I have, says that the Magnificat is “a bombshell...a bombshell!!!
- He says that people have forgotten its “revolutionary terror”... that it takes “the standards of the world and turns them upside down.”
- Barclay teaches that in the Magnificat, there are three revolutions: “an economic revolution; a political revolution; and a moral revolution.”

Say what?!?!?! That beautiful, sweet Mary’s song? – is the germ of revolutions – economic, political and moral?!?!?!?

And that germ of revolution, that deceptively gentle, lovely song, my friends, is from the heart and through the mouth of Mary – whose soul-magnifies-the-Lord Mary, whose child is the Jesus who would be born to be the heart of these revolutions Mary...Mary - who is the heart of this church...of all Christian churches.

So – in a way – Mary – her heart – her soul - her connection to and with God – is who and what God recognizes as God’s partner in birthing the hope of the world – the hope of peace & love and joy.

So why are we hearing all this today? A story about bombs and revolution on a sweet celebrative holiday called Christmas?



Because Mary's story can be our story too... each of us and all of us – as an individual child of God whose soul can magnify the Lord, and all of us as God's family whose soul can magnify the Lord. Each of us and all of us have opportunities to birth another soul to magnify the Lord. Look around you wherever you are – family, neighbors, friends and friends to be – there are those around us who need the love and peace of God, the compassion of Jesus, the joy of spirit.

Are we not committed to follow the footsteps of Jesus? YES! Are we not committed to birth souls to magnify the Lord? Yes?!!!

THEN - may our story like Mary's Story come alive this Christmas and beyond! Amen.