



“TRUSTING”

SCRIPTURE: LUKE 1:46b-55

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, December 17, 2023, Advent #3

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Luke 1:46b-55

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name.

God's mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. God has shown strength with their arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 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. God has helped their servant Israel, in remembrance of God's mercy, according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever

The Word of the LORD

Thanks be to God.

I doubt I am the only person in this room who has a complicated relationship with Mary, Jesus' mother.

I grew up Presbyterian—we are presbyterian as far back as there were presbyterians. That's not the case for a lot of people in this community. As Presbyterians, we knew just enough about Mary for her to pro-up certain standards of femininity and mannerliness, but not to see her liberative capacity.

Mary was meek and mild, unsexed somehow. As I grew up and studied Mary, she became more problematic—a virgin and a mother—an impossible standard for women to meet.

As a young woman, Mary taught me things as I struggled to figure out what faithfulness looked like when your virginity is stolen from you. I had planned on taking the route of utmost respectability—to wait until I was married. That was the way to be faithful, that was the way to assure that I was a good person.

I can't say that I remember thinking a lot about Mary as a 15 year old when I was raped and in an abusive relationship, and stalked for years after that. But I know I thought I was already beyond the pale. Mary was a carrier of all kinds of patriarchal standards that I failed to meet and could not reclaim for myself.

Back then I didn't see her as a person who kept the kinds of secrets I kept.

It really wasn't helpful to have the Virgin Mary as a model in those days. I was not taught that she was scrappy, bold, and brave. I was taught that she was meek and mild. I was taught that she was serene, obedient, and submissive. Mary didn't complain. Mary didn't make people uncomfortable with the truth about her. Mary didn't ask for support.

I could have used the real Mary back in those days. The Mary of liberation, the Mary of the Magnificat. The Mary who did not stay in her place. The Mary who carried a lot of secrets at the same time she found safety and solace in God's promises to her and through her.

As I became an adult, I started to see how Mary had been taken captive by patriarchy. And how other women around the world saw her as a powerful intercessor, an interlocutor with God. How other cultures embraced her as sister, mother, God-bearer in ways that didn't teach quiet and submission, but that taught trust in a God of liberation.

Learning to love Mary and feel connected to her has been a complicated journey for me.

Mary was a part of the system that kept me quiet, that kept me ashamed, that kept me captive to a dangerous person who threatened my life more times than I can say, who enforced my submission with his verbal threats, his physical threats, his gaslighting, his emotional blackmail.

Those years of trauma are a part of me. They have shaped my life in the deepest parts of me—my cells, my heart, my thoughts, my dreams. Trying to be like Mary, the serene virgin mother, was part of what kept me in an abusive relationship. And even after I found the courage to get out of the relationship, the Mary I saw back then helped to keep me ashamed, scared, wracked by the anguish of being damaged goods. And I held on to the secrets and to the shame.

Mary the Virgin Mother, Mary the acquiescent wife. Mary the mother who never raised her voice. Mary the carrier of unending grief.

I feel sorrow when I look back at the journey from where I am now. Mary could have been my inspiration, Mary could have been my companion, Mary could have told me it was not my fault and that I could take a chance on trusting someone with the truth.

Mary could have been a model for realizing that God can work miracles through someone who feels like they have everything and nothing to lose at the same time.

Mary is a liberator! She is more warrior than she is submissive. More goddess than meek and mild. In fact, the Magnificat may have been an old Maccabean battle hymn (Schaberg, 92). The Magnificat is a victory song. This is not a merely hoped for salvation that Mary sings of. The aorist tense in the original language means it has, on some level and in some way, already been accomplished for Mary.

The Magnificat also has echoes of the Hebrew Scripture and Hannah's song. Another woman who became pregnant in unlikely circumstances. Hannah (like Elizabeth, not like Mary) could not bear a child but ended up giving birth to Samuel. If this song is based on Hannah's, it would make much more sense for it to have been Elizabeth's song—a woman who could not bear children and then became pregnant with John the Baptist. There is an alternative tradition of this part of Luke's gospel that contained the phrase, "and Elizabeth said" before the Magnificat making it Elizabeth's song and not Mary's.

But the most trusted and well-preserved manuscripts attribute the Magnificat to Mary.

Luke attributed this to Mary because she had experienced one of the worst things a woman can experience other than being unable to bear children, she had experienced sexual violation in some way shape or form. She became pregnant not in the appropriate way for a young woman betrothed—she was pregnant before she went home to live with the man who she was to marry.

She was in a precarious and complicated situation. Probably somewhere around 13-15 years old in a world in which her place in the social fabric was heavily determined by the man who was responsible for her—her father or her husband.

The Magnificat has been called one of the most revolutionary documents in history: moral, social, and economic in nature. Mary is praising God for what has happened to her.

What is it that has happened to Mary?

In the mid 90s when I was in Divinity School at Vanderbilt and at Emory for my PhD, I was learning the Bible and the Christian theological tradition from feminists and womanists and constructive theologians. I was introduced to a Mary I had never imagined.

Jane Schaberg, a biblical scholar, wrote a book called “The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives.” The book first came out in 1987, the year I graduated from high school. It was very controversial. And her car was even set on fire and she received threats because of it. This book was one of my text books in one of my New Testament classes taught by Dr. Amy Jill Levine.

Schaberg methodically works through these verses in Luke 1. For instance, in verse 48 “tapeinosis” is translated in the NRSV as “lowly state.” Schaberg explains that usually this term means “humiliation.” Some interpret this “low estate” as about Mary’s poverty, her humility about her station in life, her knowing herself to be in need of God’s grace and assistance.

Schaberg offers that this word signals “...an attitude that arises out of an experience of injustice.”

I can’t unpack Schaberg’s entire argument for you today, but she was decolonizing Mary—removing the patriarchal garb and guise that concealed and co-opted Mary to be an apologist for all kinds of concepts of women’s bodies and female sexuality.

Schaberg’s core argument is that prior to the second century when the teaching of the virgin birth became the orthodox teaching of institutionalized Christianity, there were other traditions that had different explanations for what happened to Mary. One is a tradition supported by early Jewish writings that suggested Mary was impregnated in a sexual assault, probably by a Roman soldier as would have not been uncommon in an occupied context.

In the Magnificat, Mary sings of her humiliation and distress with a word that in other scriptural usage is a derivative of the word used for “sexual humiliation.” And in Mary’s culture, both adultery and rape were a more pronounced cause for social shame than what was called barrenness, or the inability to bear children (Schaberg, 98). The majority of biblical annunciations are a response to the plight of barrenness (108). But Mary was not unable to bear children.

Sexual humiliation, in Mary’s context, was the worst thing that could happen to a young woman. Her sexuality and sexual purity was how she was woven into the social fabric of

her culture and her community. Sexual humiliation could cause her to lose her place in her community, her culture, her world.

Schaberg also explores the words used in other places in both Matthew and Luke about how the Spirit “overshadowed” Mary. This word is used in other places to describe God’s presence to people who are in danger or who are afflicted in some way. This word is about protection. It is not ominous. It is a way God shares power; it is a way God empowers the culturally humiliated to integrate their distress into a new way of being in the world that embodies God’s promise of liberation for all.

God enveloped Mary to empower her—to take her humiliation and turn it into a radical kind of power to be a God-bearer to the world.

When the virgin birth became orthodoxy, other teachings were labeled heresies, and other writings were destroyed. Please remember that we have access to a tiny fraction of the writings and traditions about Jesus and Mary. Most of them were destroyed by the church and the fathers of the church when orthodoxy was born.

Think the earliest iterations of book bannings and burnings—this is what was going on in the later part of the 1st and early 2nd centuries. We have no access to most of what was lost. It was another assault of Mary to force her to give birth to a story that would keep her silent and concealed in plain sight.

It is a testament to Mary’s power, that even her colonized identity found a way to liberate so many. Even in her concealment she found a way to empower women, even as she was also a tool of oppression. Mary embodies the complexity we all carry in our bodies—we are assimilated into oppressive systems even as we resist, even as we persist in our longing for the world to change and for our bodies to be set free.

And there is real grief here, that we lost a lot as a human race when we lost access to the possibility that Mary experienced what many people in history have experienced—our bodies being unsafe in the world, our bodies being a site of conflicting and dangerous discourses about what it means to be human.

I am 54 years old now, and I am still learning how to tend to those parts of me that were so deeply wounded in my teenage years. The wounding was deep and it came from not just the person who assaulted me, but from the community who acted as if everything was fine. The people who covered for him, who told me I was the problem. I said goodbye to seeing this world as a safe place to be early on in my life. I know many of you have this same experience.

Mary's solidarity with us is something I am inviting you to embrace today if you feel ready for that kind of blessing in your journey.

God's power to empower the illegitimate, the discarded, the locked up, the subdued—the ones not believed, the ones on the frayed edges of the social fabric, the ones violated and unacknowledged, the ones who have every reason to give up on this world.

Mary tells us instead to trust a God, not who occupied her life by force, but a God who saved her from the ravages of a culture who was well practiced at erasing girls like her. Mary teaches us about trusting God with those parts of ourselves—the parts we have to keep secret to stay safe.

Mary trusted the God who promises relief to all captives of oppression.

My faith was sealed forever in the terrifying and withering days of my life as a 15, 16, 17 year old. God was with me. I felt it. My body was in constant danger, and traumatized repeatedly. And I was protected and accompanied in my spirit, my soul. And God forged my calling from there—a life that only makes sense if I give everything to the promise of liberation for all people. I believe it. I live and breathe it. And I will stay the course because God saved me—Jesus was there in the deepest, darkest shadows. That's where I learn and relearn trust in a world that is all too often not trustworthy. Because God is trustworthy.

That's the Mary I know now. The Mary who inspires and humbles, who models and teaches us how to say yes to God's unmatched power to forge new life in the shadows, in our vulnerability and in our shame.

Thanks be to God.