

Micah 5: 2-5a
Psalm 146: 5-10
Luke 1: 39-55

Hidden in Plain Sight
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Mary R. Brownlow

This is an extravagant season. It began a month ago, when all the ads were gearing us up for those great high holy days: Black Friday, Cyber Monday and Giving Tuesday. And don't forget the sacred festival of The Last Free Day of Shipping, when your gift packages are guaranteed to arrive for distant friends and relatives in time for the 25th.

This is an extravagant season. The streets are decorated, we have wonderful opportunities for dining and baking, people wear their holiday finery to holiday parties...everyone is tempted to invest a little more to show a little more jollity.

This is a season for extravagant singing. Performances of theater and sacred music, Messiah sing-alongs, Christmas caroling...this is a great season for singing. And Luke agrees with this. In the first two chapters of his Gospel there are 5 songs: from Elizabeth, from Mary, from Zechariah, from the heavenly host of angels, and from Simeon. They just cannot stop singing.

And yet, I wonder, what is hidden in all this extravagance? What is below the surface, what is the interior life of this season? And what may we learn when we listen underneath the words of those songs?

Today we heard Mary sing that her soul is magnifying God, making God greater. That is quite an extravagant statement. Why would she say this? Mary magnifies God and rejoices in God because "he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant," or his handmaiden, as the older translations say. But if we look closely at her words, looking inside the song, we see a story of social tension. The Greek word *tapeinosis*, could be translated as lowliness, or humble state. With the aura of glowing spirituality we so often associate with Mary, we might look at this as a description of a sweet and meek personality: humble as opposed to proud and haughty.

But in other places in Luke's writing, the word is translated as "humiliation." This is not something Mary cultivated as a virtue. It is a social condition, thrust upon her as someone in a country occupied by empire, as someone at the mercy of a social system that would put her to death if they saw what was hidden in her womb and in her heart. She had to watch what she said in public settings. Maybe this tells us something about why, as soon as she knew she was pregnant, she retreated to a secluded space with her relative Elizabeth. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and announces what Mary has not yet told her, and what is not yet visible to the eye. Mary finds her voice and makes a revolutionary declaration, her manifesto. She sings fiercely and powerfully about what is really happening to her and around her.

Then she moves on to sing about a revolution instigated, not by a rebel army, but by God's mercy. "God has scattered the proud; God has brought down rulers from their thrones; God has lifted up the lowly" – the humiliated ones, remember? "God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." In other words, God is turning the world upside-down.

You may have noticed that Mary speaks in the past tense. She is not looking forward to some distant time, or some heavenly realm where God will finally make things right. According to her song, God has *already* brought down the powerful and lifted up the humiliated and has already filled up the hungry with good things. This is one of the hardest things for us to wrap our heads around. We look at her situation and say, “It still does not look good for you, Mary.” We look at our situation and say, “There are still a lot of hungry people out there.” So how can we hear her extravagant song?

It seems that for Mary, there is something about the Child hidden within, a pregnancy not even visible yet (except to Elizabeth), that has already won the revolution. There is something about the holy power she carries inside her, incarnate in her womb, that says that the world has changed completely, even though its outward appearance is unchanged.

I don’t want to get caught up in questions about how that holy power got inside Mary. Luke story is about legacy, not biology. This is about inspiration, not logic. This is about radical new life, not obstetrics.

Maybe if we think of Mary as bringing forth a new conception of God, God incarnate within and among us, we can begin to understand. As long as God was understood to be totally separate from us, ruling over us on some sort of cosmic throne, it seemed natural that we should be separate from one another and accept that some people would rule over us from a distant throne. The gap between rich and poor, between bullied and humiliated, seemed not only natural, but given a stamp of divine approval.

But the incarnation, this outrageous pregnancy, reveals the lie in the old order. God is not far away, above, or beyond. God’s Holy Spirit is right there inside Mary, as close as close can be. This is a kind of fulfillment of that Genesis pronouncement that we are made in the image of God, which means no separating, not humiliating, not ruling and not hoarding. It means that we become incarnate with other people, lifting them up, restoring humanity’s forgotten common good.

This is the extravagant, revolutionary song, sung first in a house in the hill country of Judea, but echoing down the years in each age. In the incarnation of Jesus, our systems that enable oppression, humiliation, exploitation, and violence are shown to be lies. When we value men more than women, people of European descent more than people of African descent, Christian more than Muslim, rich more than poor, straight more than gay, we are living in a false system, based on a false idea of God. Even worse, we sometimes celebrate these systems as having divine origin and approval.

There is a sort of urban legend that circulates around churches – I have not been able to find a reliable source. It says that in the 1980’s, the military government in Guatemala (or El Salvador, depending on which version you read) banned the public recitation of Mary’s song, the *Magnificat*. It seems unlikely, since those countries have large Catholic populations, and the *Magnificat* is part of the liturgy of the Mass. But on some level, it makes sense. Why would anyone on a throne want some peasant singing about God bringing rulers off their thrones?

The truth is, songs are powerful. Authorities should worry when people start singing. Another story – this one is true, not a legend – is about the time of the Velvet Revolution and the

changes in Eastern Europe. The protesters in Leipzig in 1989 knew about what songs can do. For several months preceding the fall of the Berlin wall, the citizens of Leipzig gathered on Monday evenings by candlelight around St. Nikolai church – the church where Bach composed so many of his cantatas – to sing. Over two months their numbers grew from a little more than a thousand people to more than three hundred thousand, over half the citizens of the city, singing songs of hope and protest and justice, until their song shook the powers of their nation and changed the world. Later, when someone asked one of the officers of the Stasi, the East German secret police, why they did not crush this protest like they had so many others, the officer replied, “We had no contingency plan for song.”

In this season, singing helps us recognize the false dichotomy of despair and optimism. Of course we get discouraged when we see the way that violent acts and violent discourse seem to have free rein in our street and our airwaves. Of course we feel optimistic at times when another treaty is signed or our favorite politician is elected. But something else is here, in our Gospel story and in our lives together, hidden in plain sight. We are called away from both despair and optimism into a living incarnation of God Holy and extravagant Spirit. We are called into reflection on the ways God chooses to breathe that Spirit through our world. We are called into a search for unexpected and humiliated carriers of God’s grace. And we are certainly called to overcome the barriers that cloud our eyes to the presence of God’s image in each other.

Where will we begin, once the singing is over? Will we begin with extravagant hospitality? Or maybe with extravagant generosity? Or with an extravagant desire to understand the other, the foreigner? Or with extravagant witness, following in Mary’s footsteps, to the hill country and back again, to Bethlehem and back again, to Jerusalem, to Calvary, to the Garden. And in each place, in each time, carrying a light - hidden within, and yet as powerful as the sun. A light to shine in the darkness and set us free.

Speaking of singing, I am going to end with the words of a song from a musical – secular and yet pertinent, I think. It is the finale of *Les Miserables*:

*Do you hear the people sing
Lost in the valley of the night
It is the music of a people
Who are climbing to the light*

*For the wretched of the earth
There is a flame that never dies
Even the darkest night will end
And the sun will rise.*

*They will live again in freedom
In the garden of the Lord
They will walk behind the plough-share
They will put away the sword
The chain will be broken
And all men will have their reward!*

Amen.

