

As I watched the opening scene of the show *Nomadland*, I pondered the writer or producer's choice of song that the main character, Fern, sings as she drives down the road in the van she lives in. She sings *What Child Is This*. Fern sings this song in the midst of losing her husband, her job, her house, and her town. How apropos as the words of this Christmas carol were perhaps sung by another group of wanderers, seeking shelter from a world that seems oblivious to their sufferings and ignorant of their worth. Have you ever noticed that sometimes a song will enter your spirit, and you'll begin to sing, hum, or whistle it? Yesterday for me it was "Do you hear what I hear?" Sometimes we pay attention to the tune and sometimes the words. What songs are you singing these days? What songs are filling your heart with joy this week? As you think about these questions, let us turn to another song. A song that some may argue was the very first Advent hymn or Christmas carol, as it offers us the proper perspective for Advent and Christmas: Mary's song. After hearing Elizabeth's anointed message, Mary spontaneously burst into her rousing, but reverent Christmas carol, reminiscent of Hannah's song from the Old Testament (1 Sam. 2:1-10) as well as nodding to other faithful women such as Miriam, Judith, and Deborah. Mary's song, also called The Magnificat [Latin: magnifies] or the Canticle of Mary, is recorded here in the Gospel of Luke. Let us listen to the young Mary's joyous song of hope and justice in response to her cousin Elizabeth's blessing but more importantly, let us listen for God's Word for us this day. First though, let us pray. **PRAY. READ. Luke 1:46-55.**

It's interesting to me that many in the church portray Mary as meek and mild, docile and unassertive, and yet here in today's passage, there's something remarkably bold and even brazen in these lines of the Magnificat. Let's stop and think for a few minutes about what Mary is singing. Does this sound like the song of a spiritually timid human being? No, this is the song of a young woman on fire for God. She's crystal clear in her words of radical, revolutionary hope that when it comes to injustice: God takes sides. Did you know that Mary's lyrics have been banned several times in modern history? For example, when the British ruled India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being sung in churches for fear of a revolt. During the 'Dirty War' in Argentina, after the mothers of disappeared children posterized the capital plaza with the words of the Magnificat, the military junta banned all public displays of the song-same thing happened in Guatemala in the 1980s (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net, "Mary's Song"). Mary's fiery justice song amplifies her understanding of God doing the impossible.

Mary is so filled with love and joy that she gives all glory to God in the form of a song. The Magnificat is the only extended speech in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts by a female and the longest speech by a female in the New Testament. Many composers and musicians have been inspired in their work and faith by Mary's words. Here Mary is cast as a prophet- just like Elizabeth. Isn't it ironic that 14 year-old pregnant, unwed, Jewish "Mary sings her prophetic song on her cousin Elizabeth's doorstep, while Zechariah, the 'official spokesperson of God', endured his divine silencing" (Thomas)? Mary is the voice of the

downtrodden. The famous opening lines of her prophecy in the NRSV, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46-47), paints a picture of one who declares the greatness of the Lord. That’s what magnify means- to declare the greatness of. The CEB translates this, “**With all my heart I glorify the Lord!**” “Before the Magnificat points to anything else, it points to joy. Specifically, it reminds us that the appropriate response to God’s complicated presence in our lives is joy. Not fear. Not guilt. Not penance. Not obligation. *Joy*. Indeed, deep and irresistible joy is at the heart of the entire Christmas story” (Thomas). Consider the circumstances under which Mary sings- she’s an unmarried, pregnant teenager in a culture that considers it appropriate to stone young women in her condition and she still doesn’t know if her fiancé is going to stick around. And yet, Mary sings of joy and praise God’s name. Instead of succumbing to shame, scandal or “woe is me,” “Mary insists that her very body is infused with the presence and power of a God who acts decisively and generously in history. In *her* history. In *her* life” (Thomas). Mary uses personal pronouns here but then changes to encompass the larger community. She focuses on God’s redeeming mercy, justice, and love. Mary is practicing what she is preaching, as she comes from a poor family. She’s nowhere near royalty and is indeed among the lowly in society. Afterall, it’s in Mary’s lowliness that God favors her, not in spite of it. God is near to lowliness; God loves the lost, neglected, unseemly, excluded, weak and broken. How many of us can lean into God’s delight or entertain the possibility that God looks on us with favor as well? Mary does, and she praises God that she’ll be known by future

generations as “blessed” because God has done great things for her and holy is God’s name. **Mary sings from the heart.** What would it look like to frame our lives in this way? What would it take to make joy our bedrock (Thomas)?

After Mary joyfully magnifies God, she bursts into an anthem of hope and justice for the world’s poorest, most forgotten, most brokenhearted, most oppressed people (Thomas). Mary uses past tense in her prophecy. It’s almost as if Mary is calling the people to remember that this is who God is- this is what God’s love looks like. Mary is calling down a new order! Scholars indicate that past tense is commonly used in scripture “to express hope in the future”(Harper Bible Commentary). “Prophets almost never get their verb tenses straight, because part of their gift is being able to see the world as God sees it- not divided into things that are already over and things that have not happened yet, but as an eternally unfolding mystery that surprises everyone- maybe even God” (Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 18, *Home By Another Way*). Mary casts a vision of the kingdom of God here on earth. This is the song God has placed in Mary’s heart, and she sings it confidently!

Mary and Elizabeth have both said yes to God, which leads us to wonder what will be asked of us. What is our God-given calling? Perhaps Mary gives us a clue as she imitates what God has done for her, singing that God is doing a new thing- and how the wrongs of history will be made right. The order is being reversed. Mary may not have known all the details but she knows the life growing inside her will

make all things new, transforming the world. In it, Mary calls us to be agents of change...to be mini Christ bearers- bringing Christ's light into the world. We're commissioned/called to make this our song. Yet, "even when we do realize what we're singing, how often do we actually let those words transform our hearts or our actions or our perspectives" (Jim Wallis, *Singing Our Way Back To Hope*, Sojourners).

The more I listen to and read Mary's words again and again, I think of other songs that echo some of her words- songs such as Bob Marley's, *Redemption Song*, or Tracey Chapman's, *Talkin' Bout a Revolution*, or U2's, *Magnificent*. The more I listen to and read Mary's words again and again, I am reminded of modern day prophets like Bree Newsome who Rachel Held Evans highlights in her book *Inspire*. Held Evans writes, "On a muggy June morning in South Carolina, a young black woman named Bree Newsome scaled the thirty-foot flagpole outside the state capitol building and removed its Confederate flag. As police and protestors shouted at her from the ground, Newsome, just thirty years old and wearing a helmet and harness, shouted back, 'In the name of Jesus, this flag has to come down. I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today.'" While many have called her crazy (probably like some dismissed Mary), Bree is an artist and is the daughter of the former dean of the School of Divinity at Howard University. On June 27, 2015, ten days after a white supremacist shot and killed nine Black parishioners at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, Newsome removed the flag and was arrested. A Christian, Newsome finds her faith provides her with both guidance and the strength to do her work. Held

Evans writes, “Bree Newsome, in scaling that flagpole, removing the Confederate flag, and declaring God’s reign over and above the centuries-long reign of white supremacy, honored a long and storied tradition of prophetic protest. Her actions helped my generation visualize a better future. She simultaneously revealed things as they are and how they might be.”

Like Bree’s actions, Mary’s words reminds us that God’s justice and mercy show up counter-culturally and in ways that make many of us uncomfortable, hence the reason this song has been banned at key points in history. Mary’s words are words of both hope and judgment. Some of us want to tame or ignore or reinterpret these words to soften them but for some of us...these words are music to our ears. Mary paints a picture of a reordered and renewed world- “a world so beautifully characterized by love and justice, only the Christ she carries in her womb can birth it into being. Isn’t that a world worth singing about? Even if it costs us before it fulfills us (Thomas)? The same God who made a promise to Abraham and all his descendants is the same God who has and continues to redeem and bring justice through Jesus Christ- even in absurd and crazy circumstances. It’s been that way throughout the biblical story and throughout our own stories. Elizabeth and Mary, two courageous, faithful women prophets, are pregnant with the light and hope of the world. The unborn Christ child- the one with brown skin on-who brings salvation for all, will soon have us all singing, “Joy to the World”- but not quite yet. So, while we wait, we sing! We need songs such as Mary’s to remind us of what God and God’s world is

all about and, therefore what our lives should be too. So...can you find your voice and share it with a world that desperately needs to hear some hope, joy and good news? **What does your Magnificat sound like this year?** What song moves you to action, clarifying the deep trust and faith that God is doing something new, not just in your life but in this world? If you can't think of one, Mary's song will do. Just sing! Make a joyful noise until the Lord! Amen.