

2020-12-20 The Magnificat: A Feminist Reading

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Carole McNamara]

Today's reading comes from the book of Luke, chapter 1, verses 26 through 38:

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."^[a] ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"^[b] ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born^[c] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

[Voice of Hannah Vickner Hough]

Hi, everyone! My name is Hannah. I've been an Artisan Church community participant for about four years now. I don't have a background in ministry or theology. I'm a lawyer in my day job, so I do have a little bit of public speaking experience, but it's usually in front of judges and court and not my friends in church. So, I'm trusting that you guys are going to be a little more

2020-12-20 The Magnificat: A Feminist Reading

gracious then the judges and the court, and I will try not to make this sound like oral arguments.

Another little disclaimer is that I'm in my bedroom because that's the only semi-non-communal room in my house, but like most Zoom calls (and actually, in-person Artisan services, too), I cannot guarantee that there won't be some interruptions. So, just putting that out there.

And now that I've set expectations sufficiently low, I do remember hearing in past Christmas services that Scott has always wanted the Magnificat to be read and taught by a woman, so I guess I probably should have seen it coming when I asked for feminist Advent resources and he gave me a couple links and asked me to preach the sermon. So, I'm here because I kind of walked into it, but also, my participation is intentional as a woman – and like Penny mentioned, the rest of the liturgy today is being led by women.

The sermon title called this “a feminist reading,” and while we are being intentional to amplify the voices of women, I'm slightly unsure of that term “feminist” to mean everything that I want it to mean. We know that language evolves over time, and in our current structure, “feminist” can kind of have a political and adversarial connotation of setting up binary genders against each other, and I'm not really looking to use it as an exclusive term or an exclusionary term, because we know feminism is for everyone.

As I was studying to kind of prepare for today, I came across the term “womanist,” which has a more fuller meaning in terms of the socio- and economic systems that do set up different outcomes for women, and other marginalized communities, and this was kind of the more inclusive umbrella term that I was looking for. But, it was coined by Black women to describe the experience of Black women, so I really don't feel like it's mine to use here, and I'm a little stuck with the term feminism, but just know that – and feminist – but just know that I mean it to be inclusive, and maybe a little more than it means to you right now.

When I had asked Scott for feminist Advent resources, it was in response to an image by Ben Wildflower that I had noticed hanging over Scott's shoulder in his new church office, and I've seen it for the last couple of months and I've seen it – it was published in *New York Times* articles and other places. And you can see in this image that Mary looks powerful! She has her hand raised in a fist over her head and she's stepping on the skull on top of the dead serpent, with his little X'ed-out eyes. This is really different imagery than the normal kind of head-bowed, reverent images that we put in the, you know, the little Nativity, and that we're used to seeing of Mary, and this is what initially kind of piqued my interest on, you know, what what resources are there around Mary for this time of Advent?

2020-12-20 The Magnificat: A Feminist Reading

We have referred to the words in the Magnificat as powerful and provocative, and they really are. The passage initially starts with the words that give the passage its name: “magnified”. So, this is the reading from Luke 1:46b–55, and this is the passage known as the Magnificat, Mary’s song:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor 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 forever.”

In the initial part of the passage, it's Mary in kind of the humble, obedient stances we always understand her, “my soul magnifies the Lord,” and then later on in the verse, we see a really kind of different tone, and this is maybe where Mary with the raised fist kind of comes into play.

Through the ways that we have seen our economic system create drastic inequality through this pandemic time, and in the ways that our city saw over the summer that the criminal justice system perpetuates injustice, and the ways that we have seen our political system oppress easy-to-overlook voices in our community, there is totally something provocative about Mary singing about toppling rulers from their thrones and sending the rich away hungry, Mary sings in the later verses of this passage. And for communities that have always existed under

2020-12-20 The Magnificat: A Feminist Reading

exploitive systems and oppressive policies, Mary's words are a direct calling out of people in power.

As I studied kind of more along this theme to prepare for today, it occurred to me that there's another framework that Mary's very story pushes against. A quote that's been attributed to Sojourner Truth – when she spoke publicly, she was set to kind of shut down hecklers by saying, “Jesus came from God and a woman; man had nothing to do with it.” Mary's very story, so, her inclusion of the Magnificat words in the Scripture, Jesus's birth without an earthly father, and even Joseph's inclusion and the whole Nativity story, by his choice to set aside privilege to be part of all of this, is all an upending of the system of patriarchy.

The custom of that time was literal patriarchy, which is father rule. So, daughters belonged to their father's house until they moved to their husband's home. As was the case with Leah and Rachel, who were actually bought and purchased through work of their husband. The political system was male-dominated; the ability of women to participate and move in society was limited. They couldn't inherit property. They were transferred from, you know, the protection of one man to another man. And so, God's choice of Mary was not just for the biology of, you know, how to come here, right? He could've figured out another way. And it wasn't just because she was good or obedient. But it was because she was a woman.

Mary, in particular, was unmarried, so she wasn't protected by the prevailing social structure of the time; she was pregnant, and again, the social structure had really specific rules and framework for how that happened; she was living in occupied territory as a Jewish woman under Roman rule. And so she was really pretty powerless in the socioeconomic position of the time, but that is exactly who God picked to announce the coming of God to humanity.

The Magnificat is the longest set of words by a woman in the New Testament, and a marginalized one at that. She was really far down the rungs of the patriarchal ladder, and God flipped the whole thing upside down to put her at the top in this moment.

I once heard a minister, a male minister, say that women were the first to know of Jesus's impending birth, and then his resurrection after death because women are gossipy and we talk a lot and that was how to spread the word around. But I'm thinking it's kind of more consistent with scripture that the people without power, without lofty positions and protections, God identifies as the ones worth listening to. So, if you are upending the system of patriarchy, it's a woman that you need to bring the word.

2020-12-20 The Magnificat: A Feminist Reading

Another piece of Mary's story that her womanness had, you know, held something special is from the reading from today and then also the story that Jessie read in the Children's Moment, and this is the passage known as the Annunciation, because it was announcing the coming of Christ. So, the angel brings this whole wild idea to Mary and Mary gets to ask some questions and think about it a little bit. *Are you sure that it's me that you want and how does this even work?* Mary asked her questions, and then she gets to make a choice. And in verse 38, Mary says, "Here I am, servant of the Lord; let it be with me, according to your word." And then the angel departed from her.

There is a poem called "Annunciation" by Denise Levertov, who's a British American poet, and she describes this moment in some of the ways that we imagine (every artistic depiction I've seen of it has a white lily, which means purity), and then describes it in a way that breaks it open in a new way. So, I'm going to read it a little, just the first couple of stanzas of this poem.

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.

The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.

God waited.

She was free
to accept or to refuse, choice
integral to humanness.

So, the poem goes on for, like, 18 more stanzas, and it's really beautiful and a fun way to understand this experience, but the part of the poem that opened up a new understanding for me was that God waited until Mary chose to be with him in this most human and bodily way. So, not only have women had an exclusionary place in societal systems, but it's often been the case in culture and in history that we've often lacked agency in our own bodies. And so, this is

2020-12-20 The Magnificat: A Feminist Reading

another place where the story of Christ has held wide open space for women. God waited and Mary chose.

Laura Jean Truman, who is a queer minister and writer in Georgia, has had kind of an ongoing Advent reflection that I've been following and she recently used the metaphor of God as a midwife in this Advent season; a midwife who waits with us through pain and through boredom, who waits with us to deliver us from what *was* into what *will be*, waiting with us for the growth of new things and the birth of new things.

I was fascinated by this imagery, first because we know from scripture that midwives are powerful. The Hebrew midwives in the time of Moses were the leaders of the underground resistance against Pharaoh, and were the frontline workers against the injustice that was being perpetrated against the Hebrew immigrant children. And secondly, I really enjoyed this metaphor of God as a midwife because it's the birth metaphor, which is kind of, you know, what the whole Nativity story ends up working towards. Weeks ago, in the other sermon series when we were talking about moments of awe, Penny shared about the first time she had met her son, and hearing his heartbeat in the room, and how clear it was to her that there was someone in the room that hadn't been there before. And that sentiment kind of stuck with me; I've been thinking about it since then. And it was a really beautiful one for me to connect with Mary in this moment of Annunciation – and also the Mary of that Magnificat – that suddenly God was somewhere that we'd never expected.

And I've definitely had these annunciation moments of instantaneously being aware of God somewhere, or in a place that I just hadn't noticed. There's this idea of – some of you may be familiar – of “thin places” that comes from the Iona community in Scotland, and it's the idea that there's places or locations where the distance between heaven and earth collapses and there's this moment of revelation or understanding or annunciation that moves you from beyond the, you know, *What is the immediate next thing that I have to do?* into *There's something else going on here*. And I think this experience goes beyond location, in that there's moments of thin space that can happen in everyday life, where the distance between myself and the divine closes and I feel God in a way that holds off and holds away things that aren't me and God for that moment. And it doesn't last long, but, as with most faith and magic experiences, it leaves behind the residue of where it was. And I really enjoyed the understanding and the feeling that there can be little annunciations everywhere.

The God that Mary sang about in the Magnificat toppling systems of oppression, and the God that came to us without patriarchal privilege and outside of the male-dominated structures of

2020-12-20 The Magnificat: A Feminist Reading

power, and the God that waits with us to choose and waits with us to grow and bring forth new things, is the same God that is with us in the here and the not yet in this Advent time.

So, another annunciation place that God has told us he would be with us is in the Communion table. And so, this is something that we all do together, apart, over Zoom. And so, Kristen is going to lead us in this recognition of God with us. Each of us, and all of us together.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).