

## “The Quickening of the Holy Spirit”

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Luke 1:39-56

Hebrews 10:5-10

Mary has just been told by the angel Gabriel that she will be conceive and bear a son, a child who will be holy, the son of God. Daring Mary, without much of a second thought, agreed to be a co-conspirator with God: “Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your will.”

Since the Joseph part of the story occurs in Matthew and not Luke, we are not quite sure the order of when she and Joseph work out the problematic fact that they are not yet married. Luke simply tells us next that Mary heads up to the hill country to be with her relative, Elizabeth.

Can you picture the encounter of these two women? Aged Elizabeth, whose husband had also had a visit by the angel Gabriel with surprising news that Elizabeth would bear a child, rushing towards the teenaged Mary, who was perhaps a little young and, certainly for her time, a little too unmarried to have a child.

Upon seeing Mary, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She honored Mary graduating from girlhood into womanhood, as she cried out, “Blessed are you among *women*, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” And in the moment of their greeting, the child within Elizabeth’s womb leaped for joy.

I wonder if Elizabeth was in the beginning of her second trimester, the time when the quickening first occurs. The quickening, as midwives and other pregnancy caregivers call it, is the moment when the mother first feels the movements of the fetus inside of her. At first, these moments are hard to

distinguish from all the other things happening in the mother's changing body. "Is that gas or is that the baby?" I asked myself that same question over and over until finally, there was that flutter and flip-flop that not even brussel sprouts could cause. From that point on in a healthy pregnancy, there are consistent reminders from the fetus, "Hey! I'm here!" In the last month of pregnancy, the mother may even see across her stretched abdomen the gymnastics her child is practicing *in utero*- an elbow jutting out here, a foot there, or the shudder of a tidal wave as the fetus does a back-flip.

As for Mary, may I please suggest that we release our sappy, sentimental image of a meek and mild, passive accessory to God's plan, and instead see Mary for the courageous revolutionary scripture describes her to be. I remember when I was a teenager and had come to a shift when I stopped ignoring my aunts and uncles in favor of hanging out with the cousins of my own generation. Their conversations, which had always seemed irrelevant to me, all of the sudden seemed interesting because they touched on a world I was caring more and more about. No longer uncomfortable with adult conversations, I inserted myself into the discussions, sharing my opinions about politics and the world around us. My uncle Wayne studied me carefully as he listened to what I was saying.

"You can think these things because you're young," Uncle Wayne told me. "But when you grow up you'll see what the real world is like. You'll come around and see these liberal attitudes don't make much sense." I guess I am still waiting to grow up...

Maybe God needed someone young enough, who "can think these things" that Mary said. And Mary did not just say them. She said them as if they had already been accomplished, a done deal, her vision was so strong.

Luke 1:46-56 is often called "The Magnificat," because in this hymn by Mary her first words are "My soul magnifies the Lord." But this is not some

girl just quietly pondering things in her heart. Her words promise an upheaval that is political, economic, and social, and ties these changes to God's mercy and salvation. Listen carefully to these words: "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

This may not sound like good news for those of us who are not hungry, or for those of us who are not poor. In fact, these sound like rather dangerous words. So dangerous, that in the past century, three different countries outlawed the public readings of these words because the ruling powers feared they would inspire subversion. During the British rule in India, the Magnificat was banned from being sung in church. In the 1980's, Mary's words inspired the impoverished masses in Guatemala that change in the social order was possible-- so the words got banned in public settings. And when mothers whose children had been disappeared during the Dirty War in Argentina posted Mary's words on their posters that demanded a truthful accounting of their lost children, the military junta outlawed Mary's words.<sup>1</sup>

What can be said about these unrighteous rulers that outlawed Mary's words is that at least they took Mary seriously. Instead of seeing her as a harmless, silent nativity scene place-holder, they recognized her as the powerful woman she was, and continues to be. And that made them afraid. It is true that Mary's words may make the rich and the powerful feel uncomfortable rather than feel like they have just received good news.

But let me take you back to those first weeks of pregnancy, when a mother-to-be feels something different in her body and wonders, is that gas, or is that the baby? We are in a time in our world when we might feel the quickening of the Holy Spirit. In a healthy pregnancy, the position the

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Connelly, rsj, "The Magnificat as Social Document" in *Compassion Review* (Summer 2014)

fetus takes just before birth is upside down in the womb. The world Mary describes in her song is a turning of tables; the poor are rich, the hungry are full, and the weak are powerful. Some of the changes that come when God's justice is instituted may make us uncomfortable-- especially if we have something to lose from it. We may ask, why am I feeling so uncomfortable? Is that gas...or is it God? If we are willing to consider that the thing that might be making us feel topsy turvy may in fact be the God's entry into our lives and world, we may be willing to put our own privileges on the line, recognizing that when we treat the poor and oppressed favorably, we are actually making more space for God's redemption to take place. And *that* is good news for all!

I read a story in the paper over the weekend about an amazing story of vulnerability and care. A young woman had moved to the US from Sierra Leone when she was 11 and lived in Maryland. As an adult, she decided to bring her 5-year old daughter Maya to visit her family remaining in Sierra Leone, to get a taste of what her motherland was like. Sadly, Sierra Leone was still reeling from the effects of war, and her family got into a situation which the article did not describe, but which left the mother concerned about the safety and welfare of her daughter. In desperation, she went to the airport in search of someone returning to the United States. She found a man named Tom, and with face-to-face instinct decided he looked like a trustworthy man. She briefly described that her daughter was in danger, and asked him to shepherd her back to the United States, saying that her mother would meet him in whatever city he was landing in, to receive her granddaughter.

What the woman did not know was that the man worked for the United Nations and had been doing peacemaking and human rights work. What she also did not know was that the man was grief-stricken. He had just found out his beloved grandmother had died, and he was on the next flight out to Virginia so he could attend her funeral. But he saw the fear and urgency in the mother's eyes and believed, as he looked at the 5-year old

girl with pigtails and a Hello Kitty backpack, that her life was in danger. He took the child, knowing he would always regret it if he did not take action.

Luckily he was a trustworthy man with useful resources and a diplomatic passport. He did not try to traffic the child. She did not end up a lost child, shuffled between borders with no adult to vouch for her. Instead, this man gave her the care that Mary gave the Christ child. He got on the phone to many different countries to pave the way for her safe passage to the United States. This man who had never had children or been around them much offered his best to the girl. On the plane, he comforted the terrified child, who feared she would never see her mother again, by singing to her. When she fell asleep across his seat and her own, he paced the aisles so that she could rest peacefully. When they arrived in the United States and the child safely connected into the loving arms of her grandmother, Tom faded back into the crowds, knowing restoration had happened and he was no longer needed.

However, because of the added phone calls and maneuvering he had to do to get this child safely across the world, he arrived in Virginia later than originally planned. He had missed his grandmother's funeral. But, he recalled, he felt his grandmother's presence smiling down on him as he watched the little girl fall into the arms of her own beloved grandmother. He believes he felt closer to his grandmother in that moment than he would have felt had he made it to the funeral.

I love it this story with a happy ending. Even the mother returned safely and was reunited with her daughter-- she is now 20 years old and just last week, through some research and googling, found the mystery man who helped her to safety, and now they have reunited on email with her mother too.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Petula Dvorak, "A Mother's Leap of Faith at an African Airport, and a 15-Year Mystery" in *The Washington Post*, December 17, 2018  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/a-mothers-leap-of-faith-at-an-african-airport-and-a-15-year-myster>

Why is it so easy to connect to a story like this of a vulnerable and lost child, but harder to get our heads around the thousands of migrant children who are lost from their parents, vulnerable to the elements, or even dying in detention centers? I am friends with a number of journalists, and from them I have learned a disappointing and frustrating fact of human nature: our minds tend to shut down when we witness suffering on a massive scale. But our compassion soars when we get our minds wrapped around one story, one person, one life that can be transformed. So, much of the work of my journalist friends is finding the characters whose individual stories will grab audiences in a way that will open their hearts to care about an issue that is much larger than one person.

Maybe that is an important factor in God's choice to enter the world in the form of a tiny, vulnerable body, not born in a palace, but born in a barn. If we can try to understand the deep need of a child like that, we can come closer to understanding the needs of God and of those whom God loves.

If Mary were among us today, she might look like Malala Yousafsa, who took on the Taliban and then the world in her advocacy for girls' education. She might look like Emma Gonzalez, with a shaved head, who survived the Parkland school shooting and went on to be a fierce voice in the movement to end gun violence. But hey, she might even look like *you*-- who, though you may not be a teenager and maybe you aren't even female, you still might be given the chance by God to conspire in the redemption and justice God is still bringing forward, here on earth.