**The Battle Cry of the Humiliated**
**(Luke 1:39-55)**

Boy, did I get taken for a ride. Who knew, right?

You've seen the Christmas cards. You've heard the songs. Mary, meek and mild. Just a little bit of a thing—a girl really, out in the cold world, needing a big strong Joseph to protect her. Oh, I know there's a lot more to it than that. But you know what I'm talking about, right? Our religious history—not to mention our culture—has a lot invested in this picture of Mary as a nice, compliant, Jewish girl.

And I ***intended*** to toe the company line this morning. You've got to believe me, I really only ***wanted*** to present the standard picture—you know, Mary-the-moist-eyed-ingénue, Mary-the-long-suffering-mother-to-the-precocious-but-often-preoccupied-Jesus,
Mary-the-nice-girl-who-won-the-divine-baby-lottery.

My intentions were honorable. I just wanted to get through this whole Christmas thing without causing any trouble. I mean, we're almost there. No point stirring the waters. You know how much I hate controversy.

How did ***I*** know what I was getting into? The lectionary said, *Magnificat*, and I breathed a sigh of relief—because, really, how hard could ***that*** be, right? I mean, Mary gets told she's going to bear the child of God, sings a little song—and bang! We're out in time to beat the Methodists to Applebees. It should have been so easy.

But then, I started reading it again for the eleventy-thousandth time, and I got to the end. It no longer feels like a safe, Hallmark Christmas movie script. And all I could say was "Dang-it!"

Because, if you really ***read*** this, it quickly becomes clear that the *Magnificat* isn't just nice words they use in those dopey

give-her-a-diamond-ring-for-Christmas commercials. This is revolutionary stuff.

In Luke Mary is Jesus' first disciple—a disciple ***unlike*** any other disciple, one who's prepared to follow even before Jesus has his first diaper change—so you'd expect that her words would be significant, that they would in some way frame for Luke's gospel the path of discipleship for ***all*** who are to follow.

So, the obvious question is, "What does she say?"

After being told that she will bear God's child for the world—just prior to our text for this morning—Mary answers the call to discipleship and shows the rest of the world how it's done: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word" (1:38).

Now, it's interesting to note that her first response isn't, "What do ***I*** get out of it?" Instead, she immediately directs attention to

what ***God*** ought rightfully to expect to get out of it—which is to say, Mary herself.

Then, after visiting her cousin, Elizabeth, to break the news about this pregnancy-thing, Mary breaks into the song we've learned to call the *Magnificat*.

Traditionally, the *Magnificat* is viewed as the charming and poetic response of a young peasant girl's simple faith in God. This is supposed to be a ***nice*** song, isn't it? But sing this one and see if doesn't get stuck in your throat:

> [52]*"God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;* [53]*God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."*

See what I'm saying? The *Magnificat* isn't an upbeat thought you post on your Facebook page during the holidays.

This isn't material for a *Successories* poster.

No North Pole coziness here.

Man, this sounds more like it comes from the lovechild of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren! In fact, some scholars think that Mary's song is but an echo of the revolutionary chant of the Jewish zealots—that band of Jewish guerillas bent on overthrowing the Roman occupation by force.

Moreover, some scholars believe that this song positions Mary among that shadow group of Palestinian Jews, known as the *anawim*—which is Hebrew for the poor and oppressed (or as one writer puts it more colorfully, "the excrement of the earth").

This is a song that speaks of reversal. Those in the front get a divine escort to the back of the line, and those in the back finally get to sit in the owner's box. When the Messiah comes, those who've gotten used to warmth and comfort are going to be forced

to do some serious prioritizing, just in order to get a baloney sandwich and stay out of the cold.

See, I knew early on that this text was going to cause trouble. And that's just the thing. I'm a fairly normal middle-class guy; I don't deal in Molotov cocktails or hand-grenades. I've got two cars and a ***mortgage***. I don't ***need*** this.

In fact, I read this, and I'm not so sure Mary isn't talking about me. Frankly, it kind of scares me to read it out loud. I'll tell you one thing: it sure doesn't leave me humming, "I'm dreaming of a White Christmas," sucking on a candy cane to get the eggnog and garlic puffs off my breath.

The problem that Mary articulates has to do with God's relationship to power. We know all about what power's supposed to look like, don't we?

But Mary, she's at the other end of the economic spectrum. She's from Nazareth, for crying out loud. I mean, that's the ancient Near Eastern equivalent of being from Wallins Creek, on t he west side of nowhere in Harlan County.

And with the annunciation—the news that she's soon going to be a single mother—Mary's position in the community takes a swan-dive off the socio-economic cliff.

As far as the powers and principalities, it's almost impossible to go too much lower than Mary, the pregnant teen-aged mother from the wrong side of the tracks. Any leverage she'd had vanished when God showed up and told her to start pricing car seats and strollers; any power she might have had took the red-eye to Tupelo.

And this picture of Mary as the self-deprecating urchin God leans on to launch the new kingdom God has in mind starts with our Gospel this morning. When singing about her new task as the

God-bearer, Mary says, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for [God] has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."

Traditionally, we've interpreted this passage as a commentary on Mary's inner modesty, her unassuming nature. She's the nice quiet girl every teacher wants in their class. Smart, unassuming, of strong moral fiber.

On this reading, God looks at Mary's heart and sees in her the perfect mixture of righteousness and unpretentiousness. That is to say, God looks with favor on the kind of person Mary is in her heart.

That's why you see all these paintings of Mary that depict her as the model of humility and unsullied purity.

But there's just one thing wrong with this interpretation: It gets everything not merely wrong—but backwards wrong. One-hundred-eighty-degrees wrong.

The word that gets translated "lowliness" in this passage, or "of humble estate" in older translations, has usually been interpreted to mean something like "meek" or "mild."

Unfortunately for traditional interpretations, the word "*tapeinosin*" doesn't mean "humility"; it means "humiliation."

In other words, what endears Mary to God, at least according to Luke, has more to do with her poverty than with her probity. She probably ***is*** a really great person on the inside, but that's apparently not what draws God's attention.

God is moved by the fact that Mary's the perfect candidate for the kind of person on behalf of whom Jesus is being born to fight: a soon-to-be unwed mother from a backwater town on the poor

side of nowhere. Her prospects in life added up to just about nothing.

The fact of her scandalous pregnancy was about to make her already humble status straight up humiliating.

That's the thing about humiliation, it's not just about embarrassment; it's what's left after embarrassment has moved in and made a home. It's the vulnerability so much of the world knows first hand and only too well.

Humiliation is being called "boy" when you're an old man.

It's being told that you're responsible because he couldn't control himself.

Humiliation is trying to figure out how to keep the lights on, let alone buy Christmas presents for the kids.

It's looking out over the place your family has called home for generations only to see the a tornado has turned it into a landfill with no hope in sight.

Humiliation is being told from the time you're young that people like you are an abomination.

It's being treated like a criminal in front of your children—because of the color of your skin or because of your religious attire.

Humiliation is waiting for months in a church basement, so that ICE doesn't drag you away from your family and everything you love.

It's having nowhere else to go and no way to get there even if you could.

Humiliation isn't just a feeling; it's a state of being, a fact of life for far too many people in the world.

And so Mary is the perfect person to carry the child who will grow up to fight for people just like her—those who must dine daily on the bread of tears and the fruit of shame.

What I find fascinating is that the Mary so popularly portrayed at Christmastime as meek and deferential not only doesn't hold up to interpretive scrutiny, it doesn't square with the words that come out of her mouth. Mary lives among the humiliated, and the words that come out of her mouth sound less like the sanitized version of the shy ingénue we usually get than some weird mashup of bell hooks and Angela Davis:

> "God has shown great strength with the arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up those who live in shame; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

That's not the song of the humble; that's the battle cry of the humiliated—which captures what the reign of God Jesus has come to announce will look like. This reign projects a new world in which those who've lived so long with shame and indignity will have a liberator from the same lousy circumstances who has come to redeem the humiliated, to create a world in which those who've lived their lives stripped of their dignity and humanity will sit in the places of honor—a new world in which the forgotten and debased are now at the center instead of living perpetually on the outside looking in.

Mary’s singing a protest song about upheaval and reversal. Mary’s singing the song about where God is—and where God is, apparently, is where the poor and the powerless are being raised up, and the rich and the powerful are being sent empty away.

God isn’t interested in co-opting the corridors of power, of gaining credibility with those in charge. God doesn’t need the powerful and the well-situated to establish this reign; all God needs are the

hungry and the poor—and those who are willing to say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

The question posed by Advent is: How do we who live at the front of the line make Mary's song ***our*** song?

Ironic that we, whom most of the rest of the world envies, might have to sit at the feet of Mary and Elizabeth to learn how to sing the song God gave all of us to sing about the reign of the coming messiah, a song for the humiliated and disposable people sung in anticipation of Emmanuel—God with us.

Mary's song, the Magnificat, is the song you sing when you feel like you don't have anything left to sing for.

The whole thing might not sound like such a great thing if the world as it's presently constructed is a safe place for you. But if you're one of the humiliated people who've too often felt stripped

bare of all pretense that you can make it on your own with no help from anybody—Mary's song sounds like ... well, let's just say, "the best news possible."

—Amen.