



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

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Luke 1:39-55

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

“The Blessing of Believing”

Elizabeth was the one to confirm that Mary was pregnant – that the angel Gabriel’s birth announcement to Mary was under construction. The child in Elizabeth’s own womb leaps when Mary greets her. Luke says she does this by the power of the Holy Spirit. He might have just said that it was women’s intuition that revealed it to her. But for Luke, the role of the Holy Spirit throughout his gospel is to confer authoritative weight to the details of the story. Elizabeth, as woman, is empowered by the Holy Spirit to act as an authoritative witness. This is an important detail that I will return to.

Luke has created a powerful birth narrative. We are so familiar with it that we are in danger of losing a sense of its radical edge. The story is replete with angels and the Holy Spirit, but even more surprisingly, women. Women are the ones who are first to get who Jesus is, at the beginning of his life, and they are the ones who are there for him, at this death. One of the distinctive features of Luke’s gospel is the centrality women play as disciples of Jesus. It’s part of Luke’s universalist thrust – he traces Jesus’ ancestry all the way back to Adam, and not just to King David, thus including all of humanity as recipients of God’s grace. He praises Samaritans – previously

despised foreigners in the eyes of some Jews – as moral exemplars. And in this early encounter between Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, and Mary, mother of Jesus, he is signaling that women, not just men, play a central role in the story of Jesus.

This ancient text actually anticipates the emergence of the modernist and postmodern consciousness. Postmodern consciousness is characterized by a movement from an ethnocentric morality, where my sphere of concern extends only to my family, my tribe, and my religion, to a worldcentric morality, where the sphere of concern includes everybody, especially those who had been previously excluded from power – people of colour, colonized nations, gay and lesbians, and women.

Please note that when Mary goes on to sing her song, which we call the Magnificat – “my soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices.” – the verses are as revolutionary as any of the Great Revolutions of the modern era. Each of these revolutions was about the rise of the common person as a center of power and dignity, and the displacement of kings and queens and the aristocracy.

In the Magnificat, the poor are lifted up, while the powerful are brought down from their thrones: the hungry are fed, and the rich are sent empty away; the proud now experience what it's like to be the "scattered ones" – they find out what it's like to be people of the Diaspora, left homeless by conquering nations.

To have a woman, Elizabeth, act as the primary witness confirming, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that the birth of Christ will take place through Mary – (without the help of a man mind you) – is to reverse the patriarchal law whereby only men can act as reliable witnesses. We should be careful not to lose the political edge of the birth story, either by literalizing it or romanticizing it as little more than a seasonal accoutrement to go along with our eggnog.

Luke planted the seeds for these emergent worldviews, but it would take another couple of thousand years for the plant to flower. By the 3rd century, the church reversed centrality of women in Christian leadership and ensured that they played a minor role in the church. By the 4th century, the church would become a handmaiden of the state and thereby serve to reinforce, rather than deconstruct, patriarchal privilege. But our founding document assures us that in doing so they betrayed the spirit of the gospel.

I want to spend the rest of my time exploring the significance of one sentence that Luke places on the lips of Elizabeth:

“Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by God” (Luke 1:45).

Mary is blessed for believing because Elizabeth's husband, the priest Zachariah, is cursed for *not* believing the angel Gabriel. He is struck mute until his son, John, is born. Again, the meaning of Gabriel's silencing is not obvious at first. Luke is saying that in order for the new era of Christ to be ushered in it was necessary for patriarchy - institutionalized in the priesthood – to be silent for a time. So Zachariah, a representative of the political and religious status quo, is struck mute. For Mary to find her voice patriarchy needed to be silenced. The patriarchal conversation was not generative. It was impeding the birth of a new order, symbolized in the birth of Jesus. This birth of a new world order would come through the divine feminine, which would also heal the wounded masculine principle entrenched in patterns of male domination and privilege.

Mary is blessed for her belief that, even though she was a woman living a patriarchal world, God was being born through her act of willingness. This same consent came through the likes of Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem in the 60's and 70's. They stepped up, in the spirit of Mary, and believed that an evolution of consciousness was being born through them. For blacks, it was Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X who sang the Magnificat over top of the old hymnody of racism. For the peasants

of Central America, it was Bishop Oscar Romero. For the poor of North America, it was Dorothy Day. On behalf of creation, David Suzuki, Thomas Berry and Joanna Macy are singing Mary's song. Each is a believer that a new order was coming – through them. Each of these is a recipient of Elizabeth's blessing, and each contributed to the evolution of human consciousness.

Notice how the meaning of “believing” changes here. This is not about *believing in* the virgin birth, the Trinity, or the doctrine of salvation. It is not about believing *in* anything. This is not passive assent to any kind of creed. This is an active participation in the dream of God, or the Kin(g)dom of God, made possible because brave souls, in the tradition of Mary and Elizabeth, heard angels whisper in their ear that they were vessels of a new order, and believed. They found their voice, their magnificent song, and they sang it out as though their lives and the future of our planet depended on it.

Notice also that each one of these brave souls expected that their followers would find their *own* voice. It's not enough for us to hear Mary's Magnificat once a year, or to go to a concert and hear her words sung out by professionals. It's not enough to be inspired by great leaders. That's the beginning, not the end of our transformation. The trajectory of spiritual consciousness moves from victimhood, to being inspired by powerful leaders, to a realization that God is calling *us* to birth God's dream

– from victimhood to radical responsibility. I see in this birth story from Luke's gospel a five-stage pattern that describes the evolution of spiritual consciousness for the realization of the Kin(g)dom of God:

1. *Consenting*: First, there comes an unlikely invitation to play a role in the birthing of the new thing God is doing. We find ourselves, with Mary, saying “yes” to the unlikely heavenly invitation to be players in the Christmas drama.
2. *Muting*: Next, the voices of doubt surface. Our “yes” solicits the ego's “no”. We believe that we are not good enough, smart enough, or committed enough. And so, we wait upon God to mute the voices, within and without, that conspire to keep us believing in our powerlessness. Zachariah is silenced, long enough for us to hear the angels telling us that a new order is already underway. Here, God acts on our behalf to lift us up.
3. *Connecting*: We search out another person, or a community (as Mary sought out Elizabeth), who can affirm for us our worthiness and dignity as a vessel of the sacred. We are able to hear it because the diminishing voice of shame has been silenced. Here *the community*

acts on our behalf to lift us up.

4. *Singing*: Having been affirmed, now we find our soul-song that expresses gratitude that you are part of something bigger than yourself, and for discovering your sacred vocation of birthing God's dream into reality. This is your very own Magnificat. Here, *you* are beginning to take the throne and realize your inner divine power to be an actor. Your power returns as you find your song.
5. *Birthing*: Finally, you emerge as a leader in realizing the Kin(g)dom of God. You experience yourself, like Mary, as a center of creative emergence. Christmas is now deeply personal. You now *believe with your whole being*, that you are called to birth Christ, love, or sacred purpose into the world. In the language of evolutionary spirituality, you begin to identify with the sacred evolutionary impulse itself. This generative impulse forms your deepest, most authentic Self, and the personal self, focused on survival, becomes less important. Here, we act on behalf of God to lift others up, and the cycle is ready to repeat itself.

This is the Mary-cycle that we all re-enact in the process of moving from victimhood to personal and collective responsibility. Maybe it's the Protestant version of the *Hail Mary!* It wouldn't be enough for those of us steeped in a Protestant work ethic to merely *recite* it. We have to *work* through it!

I suspect that, for a long while, it repeats itself with every new challenge we are confronted with. We may cycle through it with a health problem. Then we're hit with challenges at work or in personal relationships. We feel like victims of fate. We wait for God to mute the voices that render us helpless and the cycle begins. Then we go through a mid-life crisis. But with each cycling through of these stages, we gather wisdom, until we don't need to start over at victimhood with each new challenge. As we identify more with being a center of creative emergence, we bring that identity to bear on each new challenge. Over time, the challenges increase in scale, expanding beyond our own survival to the larger community and planetary issues. The challenges never end, but they scale up, and we evolve in the quality of consciousness we bring to them.

And, having taken full responsibility for our lives, we discover that the entire process is full of grace – that is, it is all the presence of God showing up in and *through* the challenges and showing up in the “yes” to divine invitation, in the silencing of status quo voices, , in the connecting with our advocates, in giving voice to unique song that is ours to sing, and in

the birthing of the sacred through us.
This is the Christmas story. This is
your Christmas story.

Blessed are you who believe that
God's purposes are being fulfilled in
you.