

August 16, 2015 Feast of St. Mary the Virgin (trans)
St. Clement's Anglican Church
Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 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. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

I have noticed when I am in the pulpit, I often start a sermon with the words, "Well, I don't know about you, but..." and after that I usually confess to a matter of great ignorance on my part, or a less than stellar habit. So I'm going to continue that tradition here this morning, and say: well, I don't know about you, but the amount of attention I have paid in my life to Mary, Mother of God, has been shockingly minimal.

I expect it would have been very different had I grown up in the Catholic church. Although Mary's status has shifted over the ages, she is considered by many Roman Catholics to be worthy of veneration and is frequently called upon in petitionary prayer.

But my own engagement with Mary consisted largely of finding just the right blue bathrobe for the Sunday School pageant or wanting to give Jesus a bawling out on her behalf when he scarpered off from a family trip and disappeared to the Temple without telling her. Even on Good Friday when my heart aches for Mary at the foot of the cross, my mind can't help but default to an image of her in her blue robe, with her head

tilted and her hands across her breast, frozen like the figure in the nativity many of us grew up with.

But now that I am more intimately engaged with the calendar of the church year, I see Mary cropping up everywhere, and not just at Christmas. In the spring we celebrate Mary's visit from the angel, then Mary's visit to her cousin a couple of months later, and then Mary's assumption into heaven in the summer. Even her mother, Anne, is commemorated by the Anglican Church of Canada on July 26, despite the fact that Mary's parents are not mentioned in the canonical scriptures. So I started to get a vague feeling that I had been missing out on something important – but still, I didn't examine that feeling too closely.

The chickens came home to roost a few weeks ago, though, when I was invited to preach for St. Hilda's in Sechelt today. I was told with great enthusiasm that they would be celebrating – you guessed it - the Feast of St. Mary.

So thanks to the miracle of prerecording that allows me to be here as well as in Sechelt this morning, I gladly accepted the invitation. It challenged me to finally spend some thoughtful time in Mary's company, learning more about her place in the heart and soul of Christians throughout the ages. And not just Christians – in Islam, Mary, or Maryam, is the highest and holiest among women, considered a prophet by many, and is in fact mentioned far more often in the Qur'an than in the Bible.

To begin, I decided to step away from viewing Mary through the lens of later history and all the many mythologies that developed around her in the early centuries of the Church; I needed, for a little while, to imagine the pre-Christian Mary, the young woman who had yet to give birth to all that came later.

In today's gospel reading from Luke we heard the song of Mary; her first words are "my soul magnifies the Lord," and thus it became known as the *Magnificat*, from the Latin for *magnifies*. Her song echoes prophetic voices from the Hebrew scriptures, such as Hannah's in the first reading, and it prefigures the Sermon on the Plain, coming later in Luke, when Jesus tells us the poor will be blessed over those who are rich and well fed. Mary is the living bridge between the two testaments; the woman who gave voice to this manifesto for freedom and then gave birth to the man who would embody it.

Mary was of the peasant class; she worked hard hours to eke out a living and help her family pay the grinding taxes owed to Rome, to Herod, and to the Temple. She lived in an area rife with revolt against the occupying powers; violent suppression of political zealots was commonplace. We have domesticated the *Magnificat* by layering upon it centuries of gorgeous musical settings and rich visual artistry; but we do it a disservice when we allow that beauty to bury the *Magnificat*'s bold call to revolution. For all of you who enjoyed *Hamilton*, just imagine what *Magnificat: The Musical* might look like in the right hands.

So I have been thinking of Mary singing this song; not yet the mother of God, someone of no standing with a baby in her belly and no ring on her finger. And I think of the Marys who are singing that same song today, and how we receive it when it comes to us in raw, contemporary language – when it hasn't been prettied up with orchestral scores and gold-leaf paint. Who are the Marys we hear crying for justice today or, more to the point, *do* we hear them?

The biblical *Magnificat* is at a safe remove from us; we listen with sometimes sentimental contentment to Mary's description of God knocking the powerful from their thrones and filling the hungry with good things ... but when the powerless in our society lift their voices for a living wage, or a stronger social safety net or (fill in the blank), it can be easy for those of us who are adequately well off to stop our ears. It is

somewhat akin to knowing that if we want our indoor air conditioners to keep *us* comfortable on these hot summer days, we have to keep our windows rolled up tight to keep the outside environment at bay.

We humans have a natural bias to more readily trust people who are just like us. So we are much more inclined to give credence to opinions from people who share our background or our circumstances; people who will understand our ‘in’ jokes; people we can relate to. But we cannot wait for someone who is “just like us” to ease us gently into understanding the world as it is for people who are not like us. For that, we need to listen beyond our bubble. Even, and especially, to people who are rocking our boat.

The Magnificat speaks of God’s action in “lifting up the lowly,” and it is this phrase – *lifting up the lowly* – that has been resonating with me especially this week. Activists from minority or marginalized groups urge those of us who wish to be helpful allies to use *our* platforms to elevate the voices of people who don’t enjoy the same standing we do – to lift up the lowly.

How might we do that? On our church website or Facebook page, for example, we could circulate thought-provoking stories and posts written by little-known voices across a wide cultural and socioeconomic spectrum, rather than limiting our writers to just one or two people like me.

I wonder if, in her own way, Mary’s cousin Elizabeth elevated Mary. Consider that it was only after she arrived at Elizabeth’s home, that Mary gave voice to the Magnificat. Elizabeth was known to be righteous and upstanding. Perhaps by housing the unwed Mary for three months, Elizabeth lent Mary her own legitimacy; used her own respected platform to magnify Mary’s voice.

The writer of Luke's gospel was himself a magnifier; it is only in his gospel that we hear about the healing of the Samaritan lepers and of the crippled women, the rich man ignoring the needs of Lazarus the beggar, and the story of the lost sheep. In this gospel, we are reminded again and again what God expects from those of us who claim to follow the way of Christ. So how might each of us work to magnify the confidence and the voices of people around us ... the people who more often than not go unheard?

I will close by recommending an interesting radio piece. CBC recently rebroadcast a popular Tapestry interview with Randall Sullivan, a Rolling Stones journalist. Some years before, he had become aware of a group of young people who were experiencing visions of Mary in Bosnia's Medjugorje. Fuelled by curiosity and skepticism in equal measure, the journalist embarked on a quest that would eventually turn into a book and an unexpected spiritual awakening of his own.

It sounded interesting enough that I purchased the book, and a comment in the first chapters caught my attention. It concerned the opinions of bishops, priests and Vatican officials who disagreed on whether the Marian apparitions were genuine. Opinions were, it seemed, reliably divided – the people who had made the trip to Medjugorje were convinced by their authenticity, while those who had not visited believed they were fake.

That's a lesson for me, too. When we aren't willing to show up and be truly present to another person, it is easy to dismiss their experiences. We can default to rationalizing away the need for societal shake-up if we haven't listened to the people who are at the very bottom of a ladder whose rungs are placed well beyond their reach. It is my ongoing challenge to push myself every day to listen more wisely and humbly than I did the day before, in the hope of learning what God's kingdom, in all its richness and variety, might really look like.

Releasing Mary from my childhood nativity scene helped me hear Mary speak in her own passionate voice – a voice that trusts deeply in God’s love for those whose needs we too often neglect. May it be a voice we all keep in our hearts, and ponder well.

- The Rev. Peggy Trendell-Jensen