

The prophet Mary
St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Luke 1:46-55, Galatians 4:4-7

Mary, Mary, Mary. Gentle virgin, meek and mild. For centuries, the church has tried to portray Mary as submissive, and thus paradigmatic for female lives on earth. The church has suggested, not subtly, that just as Mary turned over her will to God, so should women turn over their wills to God's representatives on Earth: that is, to serving the church and its officials.

This archetype of Mary glosses many things, but particularly motherhood—the fiercest, most powerful and passionate occupation known to humans—with sentimentality. It bathes a revolutionary risk-taker with the glow of goodness and docility. It twists Mary's obedience to God into the suggestion that the weak owe obedience to powerful humans: be they priests, husbands, masters, or rulers.

But listen: Mary sings a new song. The Magnificat (so named from the first word of the text in the Latin translation called the Vulgate) follows Mary's astonishing encounter with the angel Gabriel, and her running to Elizabeth as he first true evangelist to share the good news.

It is, of course, full of profoundly unsettling news: First, Mary doesn't need a husband to have a baby. She isn't going to follow worldly social norms. In fact, she prophesies the overturning of the whole social order, proclaiming that the lowly will be lifted up, the rich turned away empty. She doesn't ask permission of kings or family to step off the precipice into unprecedented experience. Her proclamation that God is at work in her body shows us, even before Jesus does, what it means to truly submit—not to the world but to God.

This prayer-song of Mary is not dissimilar to Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel and it raises a question.

Why do women who are touched by God have their prayers recorded by an essentially patriarchal religion that viewed women as possessions and not people?

Or, to put it another way —

Why would these words find a place in the hearts of the men who made the decisions of what to include and what to leave out of their Sacred Texts that they regarded as God's Word?

Could it be because the Holy Spirit is female energy? A nurturing fruiting energy that even hardened religious men find indispensable on their journey to wisdom?

Allow me to elaborate. The Hebrew word for Spirit (*ruach*) is in the feminine gender. The spirit that overshadowed Mary was a feminine Spirit. So, far from being a rapacious act, this was a fertile embrace.

This feminine identity of the Spirit may be a new, or even difficult concept for us, particularly the men present. I am a man. As a man I have been raised in a culture that has taught and told me to take charge. To lead, to decide, to dominate. Christianity has had its own spin on this, evident in the surge of 'Men's Conferences', particularly through movements like Promise Keepers, which attracted hundreds of thousands of men in the west throughout the 90s and into the new millennium. These conferences were meant to make us 'mighty men', but in fact, seemed to offer a Christianised version of the will to dominate and govern our families and

relationships in ways that saw no actual decrease in the statistics of domestic violence and the abuse of women and children.

One of my favorite authors is Richard Rohr. He writes extensively on the subject of male identity. One of his books is entitled *From Wild Man to Wise Man*. Rohr's simple, yet profound argument, is that the eternal feminine brings truly redemptive processes for humankind to birth.

This is the lesson of Mary this morning. Wisdom requires female fecundity to fruit.

“Say that Wisdom is thy sister” (Proverbs 7:4)

“Wisdom is known by her children” (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:35)

Could it be that the fruiting of God's presence in human life cannot be understood apart from the fecundity of the womb?

So, truly submitting to God—surrendering yourself body and soul, heart and mind and hands—remains a profoundly subversive and unworldly act. Submission isn't something we talk about a lot in this culture unless we're talking about coerced obedience to armies and laws, powers and principalities.

Mostly, though, our systems, religious as well as secular, work on the principle of individual gratification: self-awareness, self-improvement, self-esteem. We believe in “being true to yourself”, “finding your own way”, “standing up for yourself”, buying or willing your way into an identity. The defended, defined, individual self, along with its purportedly individual salvation, is at the center of most contemporary theology—theology that echoes the perspective Ubiquitous market that rules our secular lives. Why be a servant, when you could polish your own soul the way you shape your body through exercise and surgery? Why be weak and helpless when you could be powerful? Why not choose your own beliefs, why not will your own sins away? Why surrender to God, when you could be a self-made man or woman?

But the prophet Mary stands among us, breathing quietly and humming under her breath. Now, as then, she addresses the emptiness of the pretence that we're in control of our lives.

Mary proclaims that after the annunciation and everything that follows, all generations will call her blessed. But Mary's obedience to God doesn't yield the kind of blessing most of us ask for when we pray. She has said yes without knowing what God will do. She is submitting to the possibility of humiliation, physical pain, dislocation, terror, loss. She loses her self to become *Theotokos*, literally, “the bearer of God.”

It is really hard to bear God. It is, in fact, unbearable . . . without God.

Any woman who's borne a child, any man who's fathered a child—any person who has truly loved another person—has been in Mary's position, a God-bearer carrying love through this violent and dangerous world that we are unable to control.

Who, or what, is God? We can speculate endlessly, set one religious claim against another, or just dismiss the question entirely. But there is another way. The Apostle John says simply, ‘GOD IS LOVE’. In the Christian tradition, this child borne by Mary is to be the exemplar, the embodiment, the incarnation of LOVE. As Christ is formed within us, love flows from us.

And, like Mary, we cannot choose how God will bless us. We might receive a blessing as terrifying as having a child tortured and killed, as impossible as having the hungry filled. We are not passive in this process, any more than Mary was. We must work and pray and imagine and act as bravely and intelligently as she did. But, like Mary, we must say yes without knowing what will happen next.

Mary's *Magnificat* is a song of joy and shared rejoicing. And it also points directly to the cross, foreshadowing the passion of Jesus; the darkest, most frightening, most transcendent moment in the Gospels, when Jesus surrenders his will, his hope, his very life and puts everything in God's hands. *My soul is in torment*, he says; *but what should I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, it's for this that I come. Father, glorify your name.*

Jesus' obedience is not a ritual obedience but a passionate surrender. It's at the heart of his humanity, the heart of his divinity. And he learned it from his mum.

So, like the God-bearer, *Theotokos*, let us pray this week to take the Spirit of God into our own bodies. Let us submit to God's blessings. Let us share the good news of the world turned upside down with our sisters and brothers. And let us dare to follow the way proclaimed by Mary's song. It leads to new life, and it leads to the cross. And it leads to new life.