

The Magnificat that Mary sings is famously subversive. It was banned from Evensong services in British East India before 1857. As the archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, says, ‘You do not want the subordinated natives getting ideas about the hungry being fed, the poor lifted up and the rich and powerful overthrown and sent away empty.’ In the 1980s the Guatemalan government banned any public recitation of Mary’s words, because the poor were stirred up when they heard it, thinking that change was indeed possible. And shortly after that, the Argentine government also banned any public display of Mary’s song when the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo—whose children all disappeared during the Dirty War—placed the *Magnificat’s* words on posters throughout the capital plaza.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was executed for his participation in a plot to kill Hitler, preached in 1933, *“The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings....This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.”*

No question about it, Mary is a tough-minded young woman. Probably tough in other ways as well—she managed to give birth in a barn and welcome rough-hewn shepherds into her space, all in a day’s work. So I think it’s significant that early in her pregnancy, Mary decided to travel some distance to spend time with Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is an older woman, past the age of childbearing, long married to a

priest but never blessed with children. You know what that is? That's a mature woman with solid social standing and a certain amount of discretionary time. That's a lady who has spent years volunteering in the community, who knows the families that show up at the Table of Plenty, who knows when a neighbor gets sick, who has seen deals passed at City Council that benefit the few at the expense of the many, and who is unashamed to badger business owners for a bigger donation to the after-school program. Tell me Elizabeth hasn't formed some firm opinions about religion and social policy, the flawed justice system and the frailties of human nature. She's a force to be reckoned with.

That's who Mary chooses to go see, early in her unexpected pregnancy. And Mary goes to some trouble to do it, traveling to this little Judean town in the hills, away from Nazareth. I have to think that Mary looked at Elizabeth as a guide and kindred spirit, someone who would appreciate the larger implications of her situation and help her prepare wisely for the unpredictable future. During the day they brought soup to sick neighbors and tore down posters about the upcoming wet t-shirt contest at the tavern. During the evenings they discussed politics and the most recent failed messianic movements, talking about whether the strategy of nonviolence could succeed where others had not. While they sat, they knit baby clothes, teeny hats and booties for the next generation of revolutionaries.

A colleague wrote about attending a powerful Advent service at a large church, where the choir had sung a haunting version of one of the Antiphons of Advent. On her way home, she passed a very different neighborhood from that of the affluent church, one where buildings were in disrepair and the local church

struggles to stay open. She writes, "What does it mean to wait for God in a broken world? What does it mean to wait in a time in which God's promise of redemption is met by the despair of the poor, the greed of those who exploit others, and the rage of those who commit violence? What does Advent mean for the real world? Mary had some thoughts on that."

Mary comes out of that second neighborhood and, for that matter, Elizabeth is well acquainted with it too. But they also knew the long story. Mary's Magnificat is a reworking of the ancient song of Hannah, who sang about God's power to raise up the lowly. When we hear the Magnificat, it's our turn to remember times when God has reversed the order of things, when our grandparents survived or thrived when they should have wasted away, when the civil rights movement succeeded in changing a generation. Mary and Elizabeth know grittiness, but they know history too. They know how fearsome it is to bring a child into this world, *and* they know that others have done it and changed the world, by the grace of God.

I think Elizabeth was the person to whom Mary went to be connected back with the chain of ancestors who had seen God at work when they were in despair. Mary was not, and did not want to be, one lone young woman in a unique situation. She wanted to see herself in the context of generations of wisdom, resilience, and openness to God's revolutionary ways. She wanted to hear from Elizabeth if this was in continuity with what had taken place with Sarah, Hannah, Ruth, and all the other mothers. She wanted to see how Elizabeth was making sense of their contemporary situation. Mary went to Elizabeth to learn better what the story was that she was in.

Elizabeth is what one commentator calls a rebellious “comfortable shoe” woman. She doesn’t care any more what people think, and she knows how things work. She’d rather call out bad actors than politely pretend she doesn’t see what’s going on. She’d rather welcome her pregnant unmarried kinswoman into her home than uphold a reputation for observing the conventions. She’d rather speak plainly about the ways in which society fails to imitate God’s kingdom than act like it doesn’t matter. It is no diminishment of Mary to say that her situation was a familiar one in sacred history—gritty, even desperate. I credit Elizabeth with connecting the dots for her. Elizabeth had all the life experience and practice to see how this young woman, in that world, was to live and raise her child in a way that was constantly open to God’s movement.

In these troubling times, I’m going to try to be like Elizabeth. Wise, warm, and welcoming. Hopeful, helpful, and humble. And supporting the birth of a new thing in our world, God breaking in to create a kin-dom of justice, of peace, and of love.

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Let us pray. Lord, we pray for the Spirit we would carry within, that has the power to demonstrate love, to share promises and to encourage hope among all people. May we bear it with Mary’s dignity, with Elizabeth’s delight and with the grace of Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.