

The Magnificat, as we all know, talks about reversals of the present order. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. Even though, as Mary says these words, the old order continues, she is so sure of it that she can speak in the past tense. This is what God always does; this is what God has done in the past, and she knows God is at it now.

But I never noticed before all the reversals that are embedded in the story preceding the Magnificat. As readers, we're being prepared to hear about the world turning upside down, by being told some old stories turned upside down. For instance, we all know that the Magnificat is based on the song of Hannah, Samuel's mother, who had been barren and prayed so fervently for a child that the priest thought she was drunk. It also has echoes of Miriam's triumphant song after the Hebrew people crossed the Red Sea, and Deborah's song of triumph over the Canaanites. But those three women praised God for outcomes that they had sought and longed for. Mary was not looking for anything; she was minding her own business and being a girl.

Or take a couple of significant gender reversals. Who in the Hebrew Bible had responded to God's call, "Here am I"? Abraham, Moses, Isaiah—venerated elderly men with long white beards. But now it's little Miss Mary, chirping "Here am I, let it be with me according to your word." When Mary shows up at her older cousin Elizabeth's house, Elizabeth knows, without being told, that Mary is pregnant and blessed, and she says so—which is prophesying, speaking the word of God—typically a male role.

Tradition has it that Mary was, in fact, "lowly"—an obscure young woman without notable assets, and Luke does seem to indicate that. While Elizabeth is from the line of Aaron

(a priestly family), married to a priest, lives most of the time in Jerusalem where Zechariah is a priest, and is described as righteous, Mary gets almost no description. Mary is evidently not descended from anyone worth mentioning, and it was necessary for the medieval church to invent parents and a back story for her, because Luke gives us nothing. Mary is not described as righteous or blameless. She lives in Nazareth, which is neither famous nor notorious—just a regular place. She is unmarried. Mary's pregnancy, in fact, lowers her status and would likely lead to her being marginalized or ostracized by her community, while Elizabeth's pregnancy raises her status by removing her "disgrace" of childlessness.

Those, I guess, are contrasts rather than reversals, but either way it kind of makes you sit up and wonder what's going on. And then one last contrast, when Zechariah hears from the angel Gabriel, he asks for a sign: "How will I know that this is so?" and gets struck speechless for his insolence. Mary, told by Gabriel that she will bear a son, asks whether there's something she's going to need to do, like find a sperm donor: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" She doesn't doubt the angel, she just needs to know how to comply. And despite all the centuries of praise for meek little Mary's submission to God's will, clearly what she's excited about is that power is going to be stood on its head and all the lowly people like her are finally going to get justice. I mean, that's what her song is about, not about how happy she is to be submissive. "Here am I," she says right away, like the warrior princess Xena. "Let me do this." (Also, there's none of the usual prophetic hemming and hawing, like Jeremiah's "but I am only a boy," or Gideon's "my clan is the weakest in Manassah." But I digress.)

So Mary is **ready** for some overturning of the old order, and I think it helps to be young like her and to see issues of justice with great clarity and maybe less nuance than those of us

who are scarred and weary. Told that God is giving her a son, she knows that means a renewal of justice, following the model of King David's reign. The current unjust system has no essential reality; God can change any of it. And while Mary talks about scattering the proud and sending the rich away empty, which is a little bit threatening to a comfortable person like me, I think we could acknowledge that even if the people at the top of the pyramid are not, themselves, immoral, the pyramid is immoral. Justice would be a flattening of the pyramid.

Joan Cook, a trauma psychologist and associate professor at the Yale School of Medicine, wrote an article a couple of months ago advocating that Americans embark on a period of post-traumatic growth. She cited the pandemic, of course, as one cause of our collective trauma, but also the assaults on our sense that the government has reliable checks on corruption and treason. "Gallup has reported that Americans are some of the most stressed people in the world, and the American Psychological Association found that most people name the current political climate as a significant source of anxiety." She writes,

Two psychologists, Lawrence Calhoun and Richard Tedeschi from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, published a paper in 1990 on their interviews with middle-aged adults about bereavement. They followed their subjects over an extended period of time, trying to determine how, when and why good can come from bad. Often referred to as post-traumatic growth, these positive changes can include improved relationships, more empathetic feelings and compassionate behaviors, additional coping strengths or mastery muscles, living more in line with one's values and an increased connection to spirituality or God, as well as a deeper, sweeter appreciation of life.ⁱ

Post-traumatic growth is not resilience, or bouncing back to where you were. Rather, it is the development of new strengths through re-evaluation. Strategies like cognitive reappraisal or reframing, intentional goal-directed coping, greater social support, spirituality and better mental health predict greater post-traumatic growth. So that's for adults who've

had a trauma, like veterans or people who've been bereaved. What about our society? Cook writes,

We need to acknowledge and constructively work through the violations of the Trump administration to reorganize around our shared values and social norms. If we mourn the losses, tremendous setbacks and struggles encountered in the Trump presidency, we can find seeds of hope that post-traumatic growth is possible.

It is important that we not offer ourselves or others insensitive or inappropriate minimizations . . . , but instead reorder our priorities in . . . substantive ways. As an example, we can take actions to obtain justice for those who have historically been marginalized. We can help dismantle systemic racism by acknowledging and working to correct underlying power structures in policing, voting, education, housing, health care and employment. We can also look for opportunities to strengthen our connections to our fellow Americans and join the rest of the world in mitigating climate change and advocating for world peace. . . .

Maybe we can all rise and walk together on a dignified, respectful and peaceful road that will lead to recovery, redemption and reconciliation for our country. Maybe, through post-traumatic growth, we can transform tragedy into triumph.

That sounds to me like flattening the pyramid, overturning power structures whose design consistently keeps some people on the bottom. It sounds to me like bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. Cook wrote this before the election, and ended her article by urging people to vote. Over a month after the election, which it didn't solve every problem on earth, voting is no longer our top priority. But now it is time to do the work of revamping our systems of policing, health care, employment, and so on. Mary reminds us that renewal and justice are what God does; we can join in or we can stand by or we can fight against it, but if we'd like to be part of what God is doing, we'll accept the invitation to look for the opportunities that the last four years have revealed, work hard together, and grow past this trauma.

Transforming God, as we prepare for the coming of your son, Jesus, create in us new life. Transform us so that we may reflect the light of your son, and become beacons of goodness,

kindness, compassion, generosity, honesty, patience, and peace, for the sake of the one whose name brings deliverance and life to all the world, Jesus Christ, infant and messiah. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/i-m-a-trauma-psychologist-even-after-trump-we-can-emerge-stronger-opinion/ar-BB1adkWN>