

# Waves of Healing and Heart-Break

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Luke 1:46-55 ~ December 13, 2020

Earlier this week (12.10), *The Washington Post* ran a front page story, “What Seven ICU Nurses Want You to Know about the Battle Against Covid-19,” with each telling their personal story. Said Allison Wynes, a nurse in the Medical ICU at the University of Iowa Hospital:

“I cry every day when I walk in to work, and I cry every day when I walk to my car after work. You get it out of your system before you show up, and you do your job and you’re fine. Then, you go home, and you cry before you get home. And then you go home and be mom.

“My 9-year old daughter asks frequently, “Mommy, how many patients were there today? Mommy, how many sick ones were there today? Mommy, were you safe? Was everything okay? Do you have to go to work again? How many patients?” She gets it.”

This young mother who is devoting herself to a life of compassion is riding the waves of healing and heart-break. Healing and heart-break is a good way to describe the life of Mary, the mother of God, the bearer of Christ, who today sings her song, the song that we know as the Magnificat: My soul magnifies the Lord. She too may have shed her tears in the morning or in the evening as she bore witness to the life of her son, the son of God – as Christ bore witness to the mercy and justice of God.

I invite you to reflect with me on Mary’s song for a few minutes, and then for you to wonder the ways other women – and men too – and you, too – have or might or shall say yes to God’s invitation to a life of compassion, with all the healing and heart-break pregnant therein.

The scripture that David just read presents the Magnificat. For context, Mary is several months pregnant and is visiting her much older cousin Elizabeth, who is also, surprisingly, pregnant – with a God-given son to be named John, who will baptize.

Picturing Mary and Elizabeth together in their surprising circumstances prompted me to think of the photograph that went viral earlier this year. Did you see the picture of seventeen year old Greta Thunberg from Sweden, outspoken advocate for care of the environment, sitting on a park bench with twenty-two year old Pakistani Malala Yousafzai, the Nobel Prize winning advocate for women’s education who survived being shot by the Taliban? Each of them smiling broad smiles, each in awe of the other.

What enabled or prompted Greta or Malala to say yes? Equitable access to education for girls and women is not a new or unknown challenge, neither is the need to change our ways to care for creation. Yet rare are the voices of Greta or Malala.

What prompted Mary? I wonder if Mary was God’s first choice. How many others had the angel Gabriel approached who could not hear, or who turned Gabriel down? Too busy, too fearful, too wary, too wise. I don’t raise the question to imply that Mary was anything less than God’s first choice, but simply because I wonder who says “yes” to such a thing. I wonder, too, the ways we have or might yet still, say “yes” to God’s messengers before us.

A recent graduate from nursing school, Kahlia Anderson had just finished her orientation to work in the ICU at the Ohio State University Medical Center when Covid came to Columbus.

As quoted in *The Post*, “When I got my first covid-positive patient, I remember thinking: Somebody did the assignment wrong because there’s no way that they believe that I should be

taking care of this patient. I can remember the feeling. I can remember the day. It was a weekend. I was on a day shift. And I was thinking to myself: Who trusted me, the new nurse, to take care of a covid-positive patient? How am I going to do this? How am I going to keep this patient safe? How am I going to keep myself safe? Am I safe? Wait, who cares about me? Let's get back to the patient. What do they need?"

And there we hear it, the words of conversion, the turning of the heart, the opening toward "yes." It's not about me, said Kahlia. Let's get back to the patient. What do they need? That's the question that leads to the holiness of compassion, God's life of healing and heart-break.

Several elements in the poetry of Mary's song give it particular potency and the air of promise.

First, it's Mary's song and it's about her, but it's not only about her. What she claims for herself, she claims for all. Yes, "all generations will call me blessed; the Mighty One has done great things for me," and "God's mercy extends for all who fear God, "from generation to generation." "What God has done for Mary anticipates and models what God will do for the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed of the world. . . ." (Craddock, [Luke](#))

Second, the text employs a past verb tense (the aorist) particular to Biblical Greek, that is not only past; it expresses what is timelessly true – past, present, future – without differentiation. Thus to proclaim that God has cast down the mighty and lifted up the lowly is to announce that for God this is already accomplished, and ever shall be accomplished. As scholar Fred Craddock explains, "to speak of what God has done is to announce what God will do."

Let's pause with that for a moment, let it sink in, and be glad. "To speak of what God has done is to announce what God will do." Tell the stories of what God has done; shout the stories from the rooftops. "For God has filled the hungry with God things" – and that's a promise! No wonder, this is a song of joy.

So I have to admit that the Magnificat always catches me up short because my immediate reaction to these words is "hooray! It's God to the rescue, God's justice shall prevail, there will be not only a leveling but a great reversal of the fortunes of the poor and the powerful." And no sooner do I get to that point than my "hooray" quickly turns to "uh oh." Uh oh. Uh oh, this reversal includes me, and I am not one of the poor or the hungry. I am one of the proud, the powerful, the rich who will be scattered, brought down, and sent away empty.

I struggle with this juxtaposition. What, if anything, to do? I am glad to tithe, to give more than ten percent of my annual income to the church and to others who serve and care for God's people and God's creation. I am glad to pay taxes, even knowing that my priorities are just minimally expressed in our government's allocation of funds. I believe reparations and a redistribution of wealth is a necessary step toward equity and toward creating the beloved community of racial justice, but I tremble when I consider how that might affect my savings. So, like you, I try to keep God at the center, turn my heart outward to others, be generous, and make decisions each day that are headed in the right direction. In other words, as in so many arenas these days, like you, I am doing the best I can under the circumstances. And for that, I rejoice; I am glad.

Even with the prospect of God's great reversal, above all else, the Magnificat evokes a sense of anticipation and possibility. If God is with us and among us, is acting in our past, our

future, and present, then this moment is potent, pregnant with holy possibility, awaiting our response.

Our world right now is in need of people who say yes each day to a life of compassion, to ride the waves of healing and heart-break. I invite you to join with me in wonder, to wonder the ways you are ready to say yes, and rejoice. For God has done great things for me, great things for us, and holy is God's name. Amen.