

Music for a Movement
Luke 1:45b-55
December 17, 2023
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What kind of music did you listen to when you were a teenager?

Did you roll your eyes as your mom tuned the car radio to her favorite station? Would you reach for your headphones whenever Dad cranked up his music in the kitchen? Surely, you didn't gravitate to the tame, adult contemporary music that gets piped into waiting rooms and grocery stores. I'm betting you preferred something a little edgier, maybe even something forbidden.

From generation to generation, teens seem drawn to the kind of music that gets a parental advisory stamp across the cover. The more scathing and angsty and subversive, the better.

Did your parents wring their hands or clutch their pearls as they overheard some of your favorites? Did they worry about the corrupting influence of rock-and-roll or panic when you went through that heavy metal phase or disparage your love of trap rap? Were adults constantly telling you to "turn that down!"?

Well, what if I told you that the song lyrics we just read, the teenage jam session we just overheard in our Scripture reading, has been deemed so dangerous, so socio-economically and politically subversive that it's been banned by powerful people all around the world?

It's true – the Magnificat, Mary's fiery song of justice and joy is so prophetic, so revolutionary that it threatens those who benefit from the status quo.

British colonizers, for example, couldn't have folks thinking that God might "bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly." So, they prohibited Mary's song from being sung in churches in India.

In Guatemala, people living in poverty started to believe that "God will fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty." So, their government outlawed the public proclamation of Mary's words in order to maintain control over the masses.

During the "Dirty War" in Argentina, after the mothers of disappeared children posterized the capital plaza with the words of the Magnificat, the military junta banned displays of the song. Mary's version of hope, they decided, was too dangerous a thing for public consumption.¹

¹ Thomas, Debie. "Mary's Song." *Journey with Jesus*. 13 December 2020.

And as we heard last week, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis, called the Magnificat “the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung.”²

Gosh, these teenagers and their music! Mother Mary is neither meek nor mild. Like teens throughout the ages, she’s powerful because she sees the world as it is, yet dares to believe it can be different. Her music resonates because it tells the truth. It doesn’t minimize the brokenness she’s experienced or spiritualize the suffering she’s endured. Mary knows the harsh reality of poverty. She’s seen the brutality of empire and felt the crushing grip of occupation. The tyrants she speaks of aren’t theoretical. But somehow, Mary takes all of that pain and sings herself into radical hope.

Her song proclaims that nothing is too broken for God to make whole. The Mighty One *can* topple rulers and scatter the proud and send the rich away empty. The One who is strong to save *can* uplift the lowly and exalt the humble and fill the hungry with good things. In fact, God already has.

Mary does not equivocate here. She doesn’t say God might do these things or maybe one day God could. These stunning reversals, this reordered world is already here. She can feel it. The topsy-turvy reign of God is doing cartwheels deep within her. Those first flutters become the kicks that will upend systems of oppression. Her song invites all those who hear it to join the revolution, to bear this “good news of great joy” into the world with the focused urgency of a person in labor.

In our reading this morning, Mary sings her prophetic song on her cousin Elizabeth’s doorstep, while Zechariah, the priestly one who’s supposed to be the official spokesperson for the divine, stands there mute. His silence allowed her to step to the microphone. It created space for them to hear from someone they might not have listened to before, someone they might have dismissed or ignored. In the quiet, Mary’s song must have resounded even louder.

So, Mary sang. And she sang and she sang and she sang. After all, a song that good is one you come back to over and over again, one you play so many times that the cassette jams and the record scratches and the CD skips. A song like that is one you know by heart, one you carry with you.

I can imagine Mary, months later, at full term, singing this song in protest as the Romans forced her to march the seventy miles to Bethlehem. I can hear her mumbling the words like a mantra between contractions and roaring Jesus into the world with their power.

I wonder if “my soul magnifies the Lord” became her “rock-a-bye baby,” the melody so familiar, the message so ingrained that it seeped into Jesus’s first sermon,

² Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. “My Spirit Rejoices!: An Advent Sermon.” *The Collected Sermons of Dietrick Bonhoeffer*. Augsburg Fortress Press: 2012.

the same Spirit that came upon his mother, now anointing him to proclaim good news to the poor and set the oppressed free.

What if this song that foretold so much accompanied Jesus all the way to the cross and then beyond it. In the shadow of Golgotha, would Mary still felt blessed? Would she have sought solace in these words of deep hope and hummed their tune in between sobs? Would it eventually become her hymn of jubilee on Easter morning as she rejoiced all the more, dancing in victory like Miriam before her?

Maybe. They say the music you listened to as a teenager stays with you in a lifelong way. At the very least, her song was repeated enough times that someone, somewhere was inspired to commit it to paper, and it became the longest set of words spoken by a woman in the New Testament, a song that we come back to again and again, even now.

The longer that we listen, the more we start to realize that Mary's song wasn't completely new. She sang in harmony with all the faithful followers who came before her. Her song "was the kind of song that the enslaved Israelites might have sung in Egypt. The kind of song you might have heard on the lips of the exiled Judeans in Babylon. The kind of song that has been sung by countless people of faith through[out] the ages in resistance, in defiance of empires, slavers, terrorists, invaders, and [oppressors.]"³

It's the kind of song we, too, can sing when we stand in solidarity with the poor and the overlooked and the disenfranchised. If we let it, Mary's song can wake us up to God's transforming work in the world. It can free us from cynicism and despair. It can goad us toward justice. It can usher in redemption from the inside out.

As we await the birth of Christ, may we rejoice with Mary and may her song echo in our hearts, for we know the world is about to turn. Amen.

- Emily Rhodes Hunter, 2023

³ Jacobsen, Rolf. "Commentary on Luke 1:46b-55." *Working Preacher*. 21 December 2014.