

## *Theologian of the Possible*

Luke 1:46-55

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Advent 4

<sup>46</sup>And Mary said,  
<sup>47</sup>“My soul magnifies the Most High,  
<sup>48</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>49</sup>who has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
<sup>50</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is God’s name.  
<sup>51</sup>God’s mercy is for those who revere God  
from generation to generation.  
<sup>52</sup>God has shown strength with God’s arm;  
and has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
<sup>53</sup>God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
<sup>54</sup>God has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
<sup>55</sup>God has helped God’s servant Israel,  
in remembrance of God’s mercy,  
according to the promise made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and Sarah and to their descendants forever.” (NRSV, adapted)

**M**ary’s words in this passage of scripture are hard for us to hear. This short passage has been set to music and sung more often than maybe any other passage of scripture in Christian history. If you pick up a book of morning and evening prayers, this passage is often featured prominently in the daily readings. I have here in my hands a copy of a Mennonite book of morning and evening prayers. It’s called *Take Our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book*. This book provides an opportunity for you to pray this passage of scripture over and over again, sometimes at least once a day. It’s hard to hear Mary’s words because we’re so familiar with them. They aren’t new anymore. They sound a little bit old and tired.

Mary’s words are also hard for us to believe. She says God brings powerful people down from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. Don’t you want to protest

just a little bit when you hear that? Don't you want to contradict her and ask, "Really? When has that ever happened? I don't see much evidence of powerful people losing their positions. As far as I can tell, the powerful are still powerful and the lowly are still low."

Mary also says God fills the hungry with food and sends the rich away with nothing. Again, wouldn't you like to argue with her? "Mary, where in the world is that happening, because the rich still have full refrigerators and the hungry still have empty bellies. It doesn't look at all like God is sending the rich away empty!"

Maybe you and I are just too jaded and cynical. From our privileged positions as well-educated, middle-class residents of the earth's most powerful nation, we don't see reality as Mary sees it. Mary comes from a different social class than most of us. She is a lower-class, uneducated Palestinian Jewish teenager who lives in a tiny village without political, economic, or military power.

From her lowly social position, this illiterate teenage girl boldly proclaims that the world is drastically changing, irrevocably changing. With no hesitation in her voice, she asserts that God has begun to change the tired old structures of the world.

**W**hat gives Mary the courage to make such an audacious claim? Her belly. She believes the child growing inside her belly comes from God. She looks at her body and realizes God has done something unexpected which upends the way the world usually works. In her mind this pregnancy proves God does things we think are impossible. After pondering the meaning of her belly, Mary concludes that God changes the impossible into the possible.

With her hands on her belly, Mary perceives that God possesses an astonishing ability to do marvelous things in the world that we never imagined.

Feeling the fetus growing inside, her imagination soars. She imagines tyrants falling from their levers of their power. She imagines God undoing the schemes of the proud. She imagines God giving abundance to the poor while giving the rich nothing.

One author calls Mary the first theologian in Christian history.<sup>1</sup> If so, then Mary is the theologian of God's new possibilities. She declares that what seems impossible for us may actually be possible for God. Her first introduction to God's fresh possibilities came when the angel Gabriel stopped by her house and gave her the chance to birth a son who would rule forever. Mary may have been an uneducated teenage peasant girl, but she wasn't stupid. She knew very well how babies were created, and what Gabriel was telling her did not fit the standard pattern of conception. In the normal order of things, Gabriel's offer was flat out impossible. "How can this be?" she asked the angel (1:34). How could such a thing happen?

I'm sure you remember Gabriel's response. Gabriel calmly and matter-of-factly said, "Nothing will be impossible with God" (1:37). What you humans think is impossible is actually quite possible for God.

**O**ther parts of the Bible also tell of God's possibilities. In the Old Testament book of Zechariah, the prophet imagines that some day in the future the city of Jerusalem will flourish with God's presence. God will dwell in the city and its citizens will live in faithfulness to God. This was a daring dream, because in Zechariah's day Jerusalem was not much of a city to look at or to live in. It beggared one's imagination to believe that the city of Jerusalem, which was then squalid, would one day become the seat of God's glory. From a

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick D. Miller, "The Church's First Theologian," *Theology Today* 56 (1999), 293-296.

human point of view such a turn of events was impossible. And yet Zechariah asserts that with God it is indeed possible (8:1-8).

Another example of this impossible-possible dynamic comes during the ministry of Jesus. One day while he's hanging out with his followers, they start talking about rich folks. Jesus remarked that it's hard—very hard—for rich folks to get into the kingdom of God. In fact, it's harder for a rich person to get into the kingdom than for a big, dirty camel to squeeze through the eye of a sewing needle. When they hear this, the disciples figure it has to be impossible that a rich person would ever be allowed in. Not so, replies Jesus, because with God all things are possible.<sup>2</sup> Rich people can get in. You think it's impossible, but God knows it is possible.

Or take Acts 2. In this story, Peter is preaching on Pentecost. In the sermon he admits Jesus had been crucified. Killed. Dead. And every right-thinking person knows that death is the end, that once you're dead you stay that way. Life over. Finis. You're just gone, and anything beyond death just isn't possible. Ha!, says Peter, that's not true. Given God's tremendous and matchless ability, the truth is just the opposite: life on the other side of death is very much possible.

So Mary's theology of the possible echoes other parts of scripture.

- In this song, Mary insists God will not let poverty and hunger have the final word.
- In this song, Mary proclaims that God will not always allow the powerful and the rich to stay in control.
- In this song, Mary asserts that God creates fresh options when we think there are no options.

Notice that Mary does not say how God is going to do these things. She is not a strategist or a technician. She genuinely does not know how, or even when,

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 19:21-26, Mark 10:22-27, Luke 18:22-27.

God will turn our world around so that it's finally right. All she knows is that God outruns our limited imaginations.

I think Mary is on to something. Two years ago, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan published a book called *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. In this book they demonstrate through statistical analysis that in the last one hundred years nonviolent resistance has been far more effective than war in overturning oppressive regimes and leading to more democratic societies. In fact, they say that in the last century nonviolence has been twice as effective as war.<sup>3</sup> Most people think that if you want change, you have to pick up guns and send in the bombers. Who would have thought that the way of nonviolence and nonviolent resistance that we Mennonites find in the Bible is much more effective than war? Yet according to these authors, it is.

If we open our eyes, we might just discover that Mary knows what we hardly dare to believe. Some unusual and unexpected things have indeed happened in our own time that once seemed impossible or untenable. I name five things.

- Great Britain's repressive colonial rule of India was shut down between World Wars I and II by the nonviolent resistance of Mahatma Gandhi.
- Jim Crow laws, enacted from 1876 to 1965, which once mandated racial segregation, were terminated by the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.
- The grinding and foolish war in Vietnam was ended in no small measure by social protests of the 1960s and 70s.

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<sup>3</sup> Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

- The Berlin wall, erected with the blessing of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, was dismantled by public resistance in 1990.
- The white apartheid regime in South Africa was crumbled in the early 1990s by a long series of nonviolent protests, sanctions, and negotiations.

We might debate to what extent God was involved in these events, but the fact remains that they happened in a context where many people doubted they could ever happen. Who is to say that God was *not* involved in these momentous social and political shifts? To the eyes of faith, it's reasonable to suppose that God might easily have had a hand in those significant upsets of the 20th century.

**I**f Mary were standing in this room today, she might encourage us to look into the corners of our lives where we've lost hope that things could ever change. Where have you sunk into despair over things as they are? Where do the solutions seem elusive to you, the possibilities closed off, the opportunities dead?

If Mary were here today she would probably tell us to look at other places of our lives where things happened which we did not expect. What intractable situation in your past was resolved by something you did not anticipate? When were you surprised by an offer, or an option, that you didn't see coming? How has the Mighty One done great things for you?