

# C O N V E R S A T I O N S

## “Mary, the Magnificat, and Race” by Cindy Cushman

*And Mary said,  
“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.”*  
Luke 1:46–55

The Magnificat has always been one of my favorite passages in the Bible. I love that Scripture includes women’s voices, even though it arose out of a patriarchal era where women held little, if any, power in their society. I am drawn to the particular message that is lifted up in Mary’s song, trumpeting God’s promise that the lowly will be lifted up and the hungry filled with good things. I especially love Mary’s unadulterated joy in proclaiming that she—a lowly woman in a vulnerable situation—has found God’s favor. In spite of what difficult times may lie ahead for her, she is filled to bursting with a sense of joy and conviction that God’s blessing and mercy are present in her life. Mostly, when I read Mary’s song, I find myself thinking, “Right on! Sing it, Mary!”

However, this past Advent season, in December of 2014, when I was preparing to preach on the Magnificat for the third Sunday of Advent, I found myself kind of dreading it. It had been a weird Advent for me. On one hand, I had been embracing the joy of the season from a personal standpoint: life has been good in the small church that I serve, as well as at home. No crises or tragedies or stressors had put a damper on the season's festivities. On the other hand, I had been finding myself increasingly weighed down by the events happening in our country. On November 22, Tamir Rice was shot and killed by police in Cleveland. Tamir was 12 years old, the same age as my adopted African American twin sons. Two days later, the announcement was made that there would be no indictment of the police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Michael Brown was 18 years old, a year older than my adopted biracial son. A week later, a Staten Island grand jury refused to indict the police officer who choked Eric Garner, causing his death. So, as I continued to feel sickened by the events happening in our country, and as the time came for me to prepare a sermon on the Magnificat, I just kept thinking, "How can I preach on Mary's song of joy about God bringing justice to the world when I'm feeling so depressed about injustice in our country?"

Now, I know that people all across the country and in my own congregation have vastly different viewpoints about the deaths of Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner and the upheaval that has been taking place around those deaths and others like them. As a white parent of African American and biracial sons, this issue is deeply personal to me. So I continued to think about all those issues and about the congregation I care for as I considered the preaching task before me. Ultimately, I decided that I couldn't preach on the Magnificat without addressing those events, even as I wondered how I could do so without sucking all the joy out of the season. So where would I even begin?

I began in the only place it made sense, with my own thoughts and feelings about our current events. I affirmed the words of Bill de Blasio (the mayor of New York, who like me is a white parent of an African American son) when he said in the aftermath of the Eric Garner decision that nothing is going to be helped by "accusing either the community or the police of having bad intention or not doing their job. In fact, I think everyone is trying to do their job." (<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/12/de-blasio-says-giuliani-fundamentally-misunderstands-the-reality-on-race/383489/>)

I don't believe the police are evil any more than I believe black men are evil. It is not my goal to lay a guilt trip on the white community, of which I am a member. But I do believe that we have a deep problem with racism in our country and that the current issues around police and the criminalization of black men we are seeing right now is a symptom. While it is a very real symptom, it is not one that is going to be addressed effectively by yelling at one another and pointing fingers and laying blame.

But I cannot help but ask, as I look at what has been going on over the past few months, "How did we get here?" After the strides this country has made in civil rights in the last 60 years, after electing an African American president, how is it that my sons are still three times more likely to be suspended from school than my sister's son is? How is it that my sons are still 21 times more likely to be shot and killed by police than my sister's son is? How is it that still, more

than 50 years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, by nearly every social and economic measure, successes and struggles of blacks and whites in America today remain starkly uneven?

As I followed the news stories on Michael Brown and Eric Garner, I found myself feeling a lot of things. I was frustrated by people hurting their own cause by being violent and destructive in their reactions to the lack of indictment in the Michael Brown case. I was infuriated by the media for how their coverage was so slanted toward the divisive and destructive acts that happened instead of the thousands and thousands of peaceful protesters who behaved impeccably in numerous protests all over the country and even in other parts of the world. And I was deeply hurt by the hateful comments I saw on social media from people who just couldn't seem to find any empathy for others who are in deep pain over how they feel their very lives are being devalued as less than human. How can we not have more respect for one another's feelings whether we agree with them or not?

Struggling with all those feelings, I just kept thinking to myself, "How am I supposed to preach on Mary's song of joy?" How could I stand up there and say, "Sing it, Mary!" when I hadn't been feeling all that hopeful? But something happened as I dove into my sermon preparation, while continuing to follow the stories of events happening and dissecting my feelings on them. Before long I found myself saying, "Sing it, Mary!" and beginning to feel her hope and joy.

While studying the passage, I was reminded that Mary's situation was not necessarily one to be joyful about. When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, it would have been expected of him to break off the engagement, and he would have been within the law to have her stoned to death. However much we have elevated Mary in our tradition, she calls herself lowly, and would have been considered such in her society. She was a poor, vulnerable woman living under oppression; the people of her day lived under the oppressive rule of Herod and the Roman Empire in a climate of barely suppressed violence. There was great injustice in her world: against women, against the poor, against Jews—all categories under which she fell.

And yet, Mary received God's news with joy so great that it could not be contained. She burst forth with song about God's work to lift up the downtrodden, to scatter the proud, to fill the hungry with good things. "Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed." How was she able to have such a response to news that vastly complicated and even could have endangered her life?

It's interesting that Mary's song speaks of God's actions in the past tense though Jesus had not been born yet. David Lose suggests,

Mary recognizes as she sings that she has *already* been drawn into relationship with the God of Israel, the one who has been siding with the oppressed since the days of Egypt and who has been making and keeping promises since the time of Abraham. The past tense in this case doesn't so much signify that everything Mary sings about has been accomplished, but rather that Mary is now included in God's history of redemption. (This article was first published on WorkingPreacher.org - <http://tinyurl.com/WorkingPreacher-org>.)

Mary is filled with joy because she believes that God is doing a new thing in the world and that she is an active part of it. She identifies not just what God is doing for her but also through her for the whole people. Many biblical scholars claim that she is one of God's prophets. Her song rings with prophetic speech. It is a rallying cry for the lowly and the downtrodden to overcome evil and violence. She is not detached and ethereal as we so often picture her; she is of her people, of her family, of her land—a young woman without power but who has been called to participate in the redemption of God's people.

Anne Emry calls Mary's song a "freedom song." Emry says, "She looks into God's time and sees salvation already accomplished. . . . She sees to the far horizon and sings of the coming reign of God. We will be fed, and we will feed others. We will be blessed and we will bless others. We will receive justice, and we will do justice to others. All things are possible with God." (<http://sacredstory.org/2012/12/21/the-song-of-mary/> )

I read those words by Emry and suddenly realized how Mary's song is precisely the right word for what is happening around us today. Tragic events that involve the loss of life have taken place. I grieve for the parents of Michael Brown and the children of Eric Garner. And I grieve for the officers who took their lives—for I believe taking another life, whether you think it is justified or not, does something to your soul, particularly when you are in an occupation that is dedicated to serving others. But maybe something is happening here; perhaps something good is beginning to arise out of all this pain and conflict.

For every rioter, there are many more peaceful protesters. And while some police officers are condemning even the peaceful protests, others like the Nashville Police Department kept order while allowing the demonstrations and even served protesters water, hot chocolate, and coffee. The day after the protests in Nashville, local clergy gathered at the police station to express their gratitude for how the police handled the situation.

"We wanted to show our appreciation for the way that the police department conducted themselves and allowed us the opportunity to express ourselves without incident," said Rev. Michael Joyner of Greater Faith Missionary Baptist Church. In the back of my mind, I'm hearing Mary sing, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Sing it, Mary!

Charles Blow, an op-ed columnist for the *New York Times*, writes that the protesting and unrest that are emerging right now aren't necessarily a bad thing. He talks about young adults around the country who are experiencing these things and trying to figure out what to do about them. He writes, "This is a moment of civic awakening and moral maturing for a generation, and they are stepping boldly into their moment. Yes, they are struggling to divine the most effective way forward, but they will not accept being dragged backward. It is a profound moment to which we should gladly bear witness." (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/11/opinion/charles-blow-this-is-your-moment.html?ref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Fcharles-m-blow> )

I read this and I recall Mary's words: "God's mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts."

Sing it, Mary!

The day after I read Blow's words, I opened my local newspaper, *The (Louisville) Courier-Journal*, and saw an article about three young women—including Michael Brown's cousin, Sabrina Webb—who have embarked on a multi-city tour to share their experiences from the protests in Ferguson. Webb spoke to a group at the Chestnut Street Family YMCA in Louisville, saying she came to encourage other young people to engage in a movement for change.

And Webb is urging young people to do so without violence. She told the group gathered, "It's going to take a lot of thinking with your mind and not always with your hands, so if we balance everything out, we'll be able to get our message across positively." (<http://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2014/12/11/women-ferguson-share-experiences/20270417/>) This 22-year-old African American woman is finding a way to make a positive difference—to begin conversations about racism and have healthy dialogue that can bring change rather than trying to do so through violence and destruction.

And I hear Mary singing, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

Sing it, Mary!

"Canticle of the Turning" is a song based on Mary's song. The words to the refrain sing of God's new day coming, when justice blazes forth, tears are wiped away, and dawn approaches with the promise of the world turning to a new day. (The full words may be found in the hymnal *Glory to God*, 100, or at <http://www.spiritandsong.com/compositions/30269>).

As I reflected on Mary's song and the events that have been happening around us and listened to the "Canticle of the Turning," I found my depression slowly turning to joy with the sense that maybe, just maybe, the world is about to turn. Something important is happening right now—something good, something that God is behind.

Emry says, "Mary sings of a future worth struggling for. It is a song with a marching beat—she sets our feet on the path of unfinished business. . . . She sings of a hopeful vision for the future because she can see farther than the rest of us, and she keeps us from giving in and giving up. She sings to keep our hearts full of hope. We need to hear that song over and over again." (<http://sacredstory.org/2012/12/21/the-song-of-mary/>)

More than two months have passed since I preached that sermon. I have continued to see signs of hope and to hear Mary's song in others in today's society who, like Mary, see and share a vision of a better future so that the rest of us may keep our hearts full of hope.

Hip-hop artist Common, in his Oscar acceptance speech for the song "Glory," spoke of a bridge in Selma, Alabama, that used to be a symbol of a divided nation, now becoming a symbol for change. He said:

The spirit of this bridge transcends race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and social status. The spirit of this bridge connects the kid from the South side of Chicago, dreaming of a better life to those in France standing up for their freedom of expression to the people in Hong Kong protesting for democracy. This bridge was built on hope, welded with compassion and elevated by love for all human beings. (<http://www.essence.com/2015/02/22/common-and-john-legend-deliver-moving-oscar-acceptance-speech-after-win-glory/> )

And I heard Mary's song again, from 18-year-old Disney star Zendaya Coleman, in her reaction to a racist, hurtful comment by Guilana Rancic, about her dreadlocks on Oscar night making her look like it "smelled like patchouli oil and weed." When Rancic later apologized, Coleman responded with a thoughtful and grace-filled statement. She reflected on hidden prejudice, and the need to identify it and root it out:

I have so many people looking up to me, that I couldn't be scared, wait it out, nor could I just stand up for me; I had to do it for WE. It is important in this journey to remember that just because someone has inflicted hurt upon us, it does not give us the right to do the same. . . . As hard as it was to stop MYSELF from being ignorant and from posting the first mean words that came to my mind because I was hurt, I had to think about the bigger picture.

Zendaya then accepted Rancic's apology and said she hoped others would accept it as well. She concluded by lifting up Martin Luther King Jr.'s words that only light can drive out darkness and only love can drive out hate and encouraging everyone to "be that light and spread that love" in the world around us. (<http://tinyurl.com/Zendaya-Coleman-statement>)

And I hear Mary singing: "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for ever."

I found a way to preach faithfully on Mary's song and in fact rediscovered the Magnificat speaking to the struggle for justice in our world today. A few months later, the hope her song instills has stayed with me as I continue to work and wait for a time when God's justice will burn, when tears will be wiped away. As we struggle to find a way forward in this critical time in our country, let us hear Mary's song and keep our hearts full of hope that the world is indeed about to turn. Sing it, Mary. Keep singing it, until we start believing it and living it.

## “Mary, the Magnificat, and Race”

### Conversation starters: Discussion Questions

Barry Ensign-George

1. Mary sings the Magnificat in a world of hurt and threat. “Mary, the Magnificat, and Race” points to racism as part of the hurt and threat in our world. What recent stories in the news show the continuing impact of racism in your place and in our nation? How does the continuing impact of racism show up in the place where your congregation lives?
2. Mary’s song, the Magnificat, finds hope that gives courage (encouragement). What gives Mary that hope and courage? What does Mary know about God that inspires hope and courage? What do you know about Jesus Christ that inspires hope and courage?
3. “Mary, the Magnificat, and Race” names specific instances of something hopeful amidst the pain and threat of our present. What are those embodiments of hope? What embodiments of hope in the face of racism do you see?
4. How does Mary relate what is happening to her personally to what God is doing in the world? What are the connections between what God is doing in you, in your congregation, and in the world?
5. What does Mary’s song teach us about how to be part of God’s redeeming work even as we live entangled in the realities of racism that work against God’s good purposes, realities that also shape our lives?
6. How can you and your congregation be an embodiment of hope and encouragement in the face of racism’s continuing power? How does what you know of Jesus Christ empower you and your congregation to be an embodiment of hope?
7. God’s love and justice shape Mary’s imagination of a world made whole for her, her people, and all people. Mary’s song inspires Cindy Cushman to look again through news reports and public conversation to see God working wholeness even amidst today’s hurt, anger, injustice, and fear. How do the Magnificat and “Mary, the Magnificat, and Race” help you see places where God is at work, and to imagine wholeness in the face of brokenness?