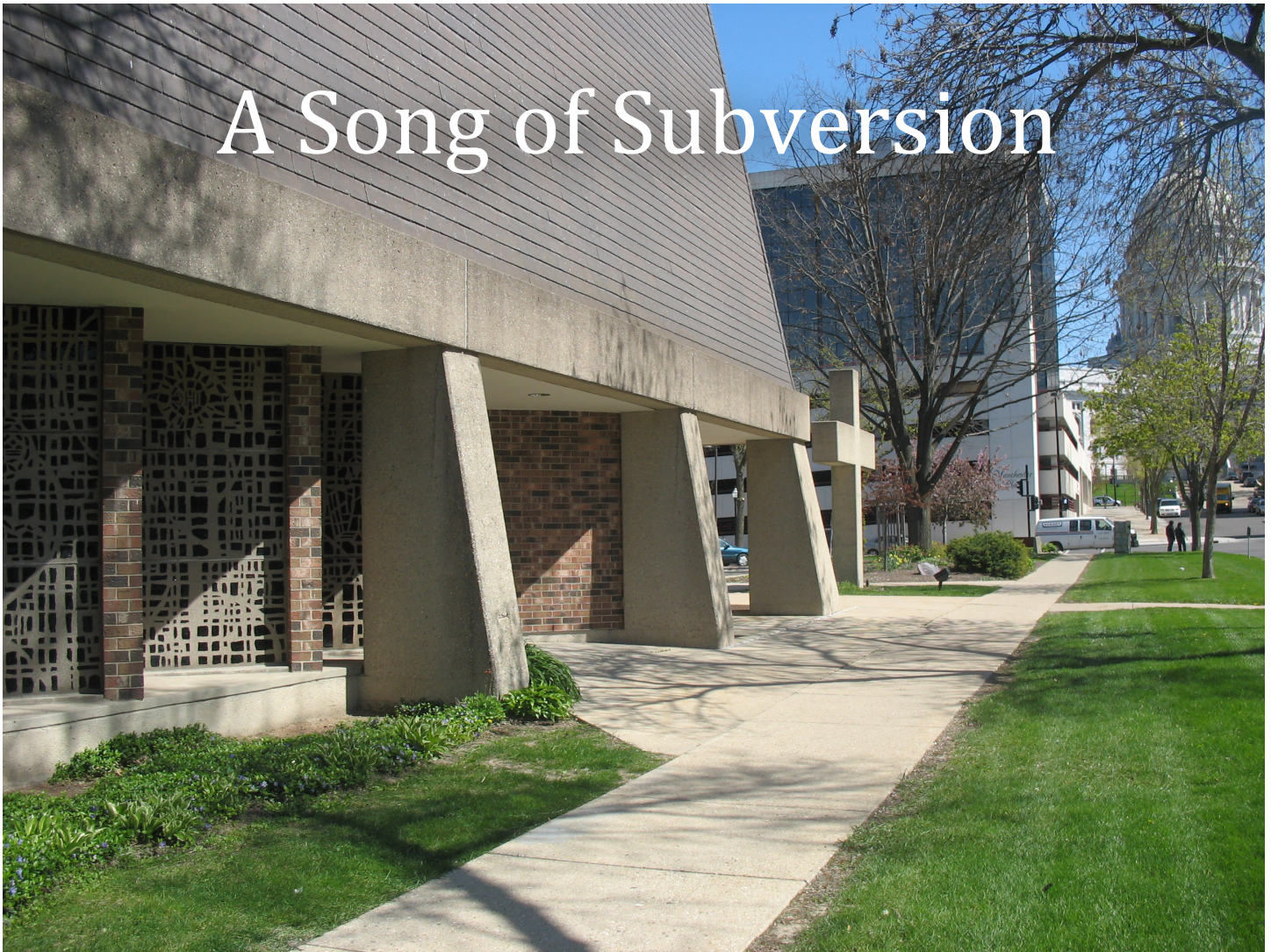


Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, December 20
Text: Luke 1: 39-55



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She was there from the very start, what we have read from the Gospel of Luke today. And she was there when the ministry took place. She was there at the cross when it all seemed to end. She was still there when everything changed and there was a new beginning. And if we go to a little stone house on a hillside not far from Ephesus in modern-day Turkey, we will find a shrine revered by Roman Catholics and Muslims as the place where she lived her later years with John, the disciple to whom Jesus entrusted his mother. Mary, the consistent one from the beginning.

How unlikely a character for God to use as an instrument of subversion. When we first meet her she is young, perhaps 14 years old some scholars guess; she is engaged to be married to the local carpenter, Joseph. But, her simple, mundane life is interrupted when she is told that she will bear a child who “will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David,” if the angel Gabriel is to be believed.

Mary believes, but she asks the question that all of us ask, too, “How can this be?” Gabriel’s answer is a bit fuzzy. “It is a divine miracle, the details of which I have not been informed since I am only the messenger; but know that the Holy Spirit represents God’s presence in all of this.” That is a problem with a “miracle;” we always wonder how it can be; and we focus on the “how” of it all. Mary does not; rather, she focuses on the “why” of it all. “Why would God choose a person as insignificant as I am to be intimately involved in setting the world right side up?” Better than a miracle, she sees this as a marvel. How marvelous it is that God would come down to us, to “condescend,” a perfectly good word when we strip it of its negative usage, and live among us in order to change our lives.

It certainly changes Mary’s life. She rushes off to spend time with her elderly relative, Elizabeth, who also has a surprise to share. In her barrenness an angel of the Lord announces that she will give birth to a child, too, the one whom we eventually call John the Baptist. So, here are the two of them, marveling over what they sense God is doing in their lives for the salvation of all humanity. Elizabeth can see the divine inspiration in Mary’s pregnancy and exclaims, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

Luke writes that Mary sings in response. Maybe, but most likely not exactly the way it is written in the text. Otherwise, we would have to assume that Elizabeth scurried to the desk and got paper and pencil, or whatever the equivalent she would have in the house, and transcribed Mary’s lyrics. No, more likely Luke takes some of the heroic songs of the tradition and synthesizes them into a powerful message.

For what is it that Mary sings? She begins with an extravagant tribute to God’s brilliance, for God has taken someone insignificant, presumably a poor teenager engaged to a carpenter in an out-of-the-way town “up north,” as we might say in Wisconsin. Let us imagine Nazareth up between Woodruff and Manitowish. It is not Milwaukee or Madison, not Jerusalem or Jericho. God has blessed Mary so that through her God’s mercy will be revealed to all in flesh-and-blood form, in Jesus. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

But the song does not end there. If it did, then “The Magnificat” would be a sweet lullaby sung by a pregnant teenager to her pregnant much older relative. No, Mary continues to sing, and it becomes a song of subversion. She, however, is not the one who is undercutting society; God is. God involves Mary in an action that is meant to turn the world upside down, or right side up. She sings in the past tense because by choosing her, this lowly one, God already has begun the radical reordering of human society.

By choosing Mary to be the ideal, God already has revealed the divine strength to humble the proud in the self-deceit of their hearts. By elevating Mary to a status causing all generations to call her blessed, God already has dislodged the powerful from their seats of control. By giving this lowly teenager the supreme gift, of mothering Jesus, God already

has elevated the peasants over the landed gentry. This subversion of the dominant is not a promise of the future; it is a reality of the present.

The proud are humbled, the powerful are neutralized, the rich are relieved of their wealth – talk about being politically incorrect! A lot of people are talking about being politically incorrect these days. There was a time a few decades ago when being politically correct was an honorable goal so as to include and engage as many people as possible in civil discourse. But these days in some circles it is politically incorrect to be politically correct. Well, if the prevailing public values these days have shifted to pander to the proud, to bow and scrape to the powerful, and to beatify the rich, then God is out to subvert it all, and Mary sings about it so that all people will hear God's intent.

The song will be a terrible noise to Caiaphas and all of the other religious powerbrokers when Jesus cleanses the temple. The song will be sheer dissonance to Herod when he quakes at the thought that a challenger to the throne is out among the people. The song will sound like a silly ditty to those who plan to build more and more silos to store their surplus of grain only to discover that they will not live long enough to enjoy their hoarding.

A song of subversion that Mary sings because she already sees that God is doing a new thing. And she will see more in that stable behind the inn in Bethlehem. She will experience firsthand the plight of refugees escaping terror as Joseph and she take Jesus away in the middle of the night to safety in Egypt, aliens in a foreign land. She will see the boy grow into a man with a following and a purpose. "Son, turn that water into wine; don't just stand there, do something for the good of all." She will watch from the margin as he preaches peace in a time of turmoil, acceptance in an age of suspicion, love in a culture of disregard. She will see him hanging on the cross, the punishment for subverting the dominant values of the privileged. And then, part of today's story since it all starts here, she will see him transcend all of this to call us forward into a life we never could have imagined.

A miracle? Perhaps, but let us not spend too much time on the details. A marvel? Most certainly, that God would choose Mary, and therefore, God could choose us, to change the world. May we hear God's call to subvert, and may we not be afraid. Amen.