

Sermon Mary's Magnificat and the Sura Maryam

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Community, good morning.

I want to invite you to pray with me.

Mother, your soul magnified the Lord. *Madre*, the voices of men have spoken in the name of your son for centuries, for they have believed your son came to change history. But I reach out to you as any son can reach out to any mother. Most people forgot that you will be called from now on blessed, and I want to remind you of this. It is you that the churches in the East call the new Eve, and it is with you that we have a new ark of the covenant. Mother of Jesus, in Islam, mother of the Prophet Isa, let us be a new covenant, to make an inner compromise with God, one made in the secret of our rooms. Help us create a covenant grounded in morning coffee, in a bed well done, in a good morning from the heart, and a thanks that lasts.

I pray to you and with you, *madrecita*, because through you I believe I can be a better follower of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Magnificat Anima mea Domino, My Soul magnifies the Lord, *Proclama mi alma la grandeza del Señor*. One of the most important songs found in the gospel of Luke, found before the Song of Zachariah. This piece has been sung in churches for centuries. Classical composers like Dufay, Josquin des Prez, Tomas Luis de Victoria, Monteverdi, Buxtehude or Pachelbel that are often sung at this church, Telemann, Vivaldi, the greatest Bach, Salieri, his beloved friend Mozart, Mendelssohn, Liszt, even the Russian Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff. I found more music dedicated to and based on the Magnificat than visual representations. I just found one painting by Sandro Botticelli, the painter of *The Birth of Venus*, but it does not do justice. I am curious, how can this song continue to be relevant today?

Community, this is the chant of a woman who is pregnant and visits her relative, Elizabeth, that was also pregnant, but she becomes a sign of God, for she was called barren and now was

expecting a child. Remember that her song was taking place under Zachariah's house, I mean, in another house that is not where she lived. She is going to visit her relative, and she sings right after the sound of the greeting of the baby, John the Baptist, a baby who will later accompany and announce Jesus.

Elizabeth was considered barren, and her baby was a miracle from God. This song is a canticle of joy and a reply that shares the excitement of two women whose children announce the kingdom of God. This song represents, for me, the leap of John the Baptist inside the womb, but made into words. Probably, the writer of this gospel is introducing to us a song that was the expression of a church that represented through their female figures a promise of God to the poor and hungry.

Imagine for a moment that God fulfills the promise of this song. A promise where God scatters the proud, brings down the powerful, and sends away the rich. A promise that continues to be real today. So, who are the proud, the powerful, and the rich of our present? Who represents the proud in the imagination of their hearts and the powerful in their thrones? The God that this song sings about is a God of change and transformation, a God that shakes the political and economic empires of that day and today. We have washed away this song of its content, and we have forgotten the potential of this song that mentions rich, powerful, and proud people to whom God does not prefer. God has come to aid us, like Israel, like children, like a mother. I imagine if this canticle could have happened in real life.

A God that has arms and can send away the rich, empty, while the hungry are filled. Does this remind you of Lazarus, who was poor, had hunger, and then went to heaven? Or, what about the good Samaritan who helped the man on the road? Both are parables that can be found only in this gospel. And this canticle relates to them. The rich, the powerful and the proud are not metaphors, because the language of metaphors tends to hide or divest the political content of these words. God in thy mercy has shown through the song of a woman the ruin of the empires that oppress and exploit. God has spoken in the rejoice and blessed voice of a woman from Judea to promise us that our present is not so different from it was in Mary's time.

I want to remind you that in her song, she is placing herself in the promise God made to her ancestors, to Abraham and to his Descendants. She is being lifted, while God is filling the hungry, while the strength of God's arm comes to aid Israel. For she has replied to those who considered her devotion to be idolatry by saying, "From now on, all generations will call me

blessed." And through this song and promise I want to honor her. Blessed Mary. *Benedicta, bendita. Abencoada.*

The time when she said these words and the time of the writer of this gospel were times of proud, powerful, and rich tyrants. Nothing new. Figures of emperors that had to be praised; taxes and tariffs on oils, metals, and textiles; temple taxes as tribute; legions that treated the regions they occupied with violence; a thin line on which order and pax were based on military success. Our time is no longer the one Mary lived, but we still have poor people, the lowly continue to walk in our streets, the hungry, the servants. We, community, like Mary, we don't wait on the promise that God will or that God shall, but that God has come to aid his people. And by this I don't refer to Israel the country, but to all of us.

Let me now explore the figure of Mary in our neighbor, the Islam.

II.

In Islam, in their holy book, the Qur'an, I found parallels with the Magnificat. There is mention of the story of Imran (Joachim) and his wife (Anne), and also mentions of Zachariah who in the Qur'an also loses his ability to talk, and Elizabeth, who is also barren.

Maternity, for me, is the closest act of creation we can get to feeling God's love. And I wish I had the chance to feel its joy, its pain, and promise. I can only share it. But the feeling of it is something worth reflecting. It is through this act that in the Christian tradition God wanted to give birth to a son. In the Qur'an they see Jesus as a prophet, not as son of God. In our tradition as Unitarians, we don't see him as a divine person, but as a holy teacher.

In the Sura Al'Imran (or Sura The Family of Imran) the mother of Mary, Anne, called the wife of Imran said: "My Lord, I vow to you what is growing in my womb— to be dedicated to your service, for You are the All Hearing, the All Knowing—" I found beautiful this passage because through this vow it echoes the voice of Mary when she said: "my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant." Both attitudes, mother and daughter in different holy books, depict service, one that does not mean depreciative or demeaning, but a praise for the All Hearing, the All Knowing, the savior that loves us as creatures made of love.

In the same Sura Al'Imran the angel said to Mary: "God gives you joyous news of His Word—He shall be called the messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, and he shall be honored in this world

and the hereafter, and he shall be among those closest to God.” The angel continues: “He shall speak to the people from the cradle and in adulthood, and he shall be among those who do good.” What do you feel this Sura is talking to our hearts? In her song, there is also joyful news. God has done great things for Mary, and holy is his name. It has been God who has spoken and who has shown mercy; she is inviting us to remember that mercy comes from God. And Jesus has come as a messenger to show God’s mercy to us, today.

For Islam, Mary also received the visit of an angel who announced to her that she would conceive. The exception is that there is no Magnificat in the Qur’an. In this holy book revealed by the angel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him) we have parts where Mary replies to the angel, but she does not have an encounter with Elizabeth as we found in Luke. In the Sura 19 dedicated to Mary says that Maryam withdrew from people, that she veiled, and that she was a virgin “for no man has touched me, and I have not been unchaste.” In this Sura, Mary also replies with doubt to the angel. We don’t know anything about the figure of Joseph. Mary is much more alone in this story.

In the Qur’an, instead, it fascinates me that Mary had pain and that she cried. We don’t see this in the gospel of Luke. Her pain drove her to a date palm in the desert, and she said, “I wish I had died before this, forgotten, and unknown.” These words do not sound like the Magnificat. I will say that in this Sura her response sounds like a more natural reaction to labor pains.

After the date palm gives her ripe dates, and a stream of water comes underneath to help her, she has been commanded to fast and not speak with anyone. Nothing like the gospels, where her voice or presence continues to appear in some ways. When people saw her, they said, “Mary, you’ve done something scandalous,” And what was her response? She pointed to the child.

Yes, community, the woman who sings in the Magnificat does not answer with words to her community when being asked about Jesus. I don’t want to compare as if one text is holier than other. The Qur’an shows something just as powerful as her voice. She “pointed to the child,” and in this passage, as a miracle, the baby Jesus speaks like a grown-up man. “I am a servant of God; He has given me the Book, and has made me a prophet,” Jesus continues with an echo of the Magnificat. Jesus is the promise that Mary sings in the gospel. Instead, in the Qur’an, just as Mary points to Jesus as the answer, Jesus points to God as his. Mary has a voice, and it is Jesus who often talks. As if she was just an object, we forget that this is the song of a woman who denounces

and announces the promise of her ancestors. I wonder if history was written by mothers... What could have changed?

For Islam, as a last comparison, Jesus says in the Sura 19 that: "God made me solicitous towards my mother, and neither imperious nor wretched." This reminds me that Jesus, in the temple, disobeying his mother, also found in the gospel of Luke, was more rebellious than the voice of Jesus we read through the Qur'an. That might be for another sermon.

Final thoughts

What can we understand from the gospel of Luke and the Qur'an? Most probably, they talk about a person we don't have a first-hand account of. The mother of Jesus sings a song of a God in a context of empires, a God who gives to those in need. For Islam, the Prophet Issa, the Messiah and son of Myriam, the characters always talk about the constant presence of God: Zachariah, his wife, Maryam, Jesus, John, and many more taken from the Torah.

My invitation is to keep finding God in the way you understand your present. For the Qur'an, Maryam points to Jesus as her answer to the crowd that judged her. She cries and has pain, she is more human. God listens to her and consoles her just as God does in the gospel. For the Gospel of Luke, instead, Mary magnifies the Lord, our God, with a song that speaks truth to power.

For both writings, remember, God is called the most merciful. For the holy Qur'an, there is no god, but the One God, and God is Almighty, All Wise. In the gospel of Luke, God has come according to the promise, in remembrance of his mercy.

Let us rejoice that we have a God who does not separate children by faith, gender or race, that the Mighty One will call us, Jewish, Christians, or Muslims, blessed one day.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

I adapted this Pastoral Prayer out of the Holy book of Islam, the Qur'an. This prayer I adapted comes from the only Sura (or chapter 19) that is dedicated to a woman, to Mary, the mother of Jesus or, as the Qur'an calls him, Prophet Isa.

Dear God, your mercy goes on and on, everlasting to everlasting.

You have shown us the story of Mary so that we remember that mothers are called to be signs of mercy. You revealed through the Qur'an how she withdrew from people to a place in the East. That she veiled herself, and to her it was sent your spirit, appearing to her in the perfect form of a man. The angel said that you granted her a pure son, and through her, it was easy for you to show a sign for humankind. From now on, she will be called blessed.

As her pains of labor drove her to the trunk of a date palm, she cried to you, merciful God. You helped her by sending a stream of water underneath, and you gave her ripe dates from the palm she was under. So, today, we ask you to provide food and drink, to bring comfort and protect those who are held in custody and fear, those who are hungry, and those who have been in the lowest of the lowest. I beg you for those whose pride has taken away their ability to imagine.

Most merciful God, let us become signs of your care. You, to whom any sign of you is a mystery, show us how we, as a church, can become streams of water, palms of ripe dates, clouds by day, and fire columns by night to those who are seeking a beloved community in the middle of the desert and in this neighborhood.

This I ask in Jesus, our teacher.

Amen.

Blessing

Join me in the celebration of the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, mother for millions of Christians in Latin America who find in her the motivation to be followers of Jesus. I adapted this blessing from the words of the *Nican Mopohua*, written in 1560 in Nahuatl, the indigenous language spoken in that time in Mexico. This is the book of accounts of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who one day, in December, appeared to the indigenous devout Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin. Her sanctuary at the hill of Tepeyac is the third most visited Christian sanctuary in the world after Rome and Jerusalem.

Listen to me, my dearest. To follow the things of God and everything that makes God be God, we must follow the road to the little hill, where a song that exceeds the *coyoltotl* and the *tzinitzcan* can be found. A song that is extremely soft and delightful, a song from a land that calls each of us by our name. May we listen to this song, and may it be so with our hearts.

Amen.

