My Spirit Rejoices
MY SPIRIT REJOICES

Imagining and Praying the Magnificat with Mary

MARCI ALBORGHETTI
FOR GOD,
AND THE
MOTHER OF
His Child.

To Charlie.
INTRODUCTION

ONE
And Mary Said

TWO
My Spirit Rejoices

THREE
Call Me Blessed

FOUR
Holy Is His Name

FIVE
Mercy for Generations

SIX
The Proud Scattered

SEVEN
The Lowly Lifted

EIGHT
The Hungry Filled

NINE
His Servant Helped

TEN
His Promise Kept
INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS YOUR IMAGE OF MARY?

Do you see her as “Our Blessed Mother,” a gently smiling matriarch looking down upon us benevolently, always there to help and understand? Is your vision that of a calm, collected, proud young mother holding the newborn Jesus out for shepherds and wise men alike to admire? Do you see her as the grieving mother of the Pietà, holding her Son’s broken body in her arms, displaying a grief so agonizingly contained it can only be imagined? Do you see her as a travel companion to Jesus and the apostles, kind of like an efficient, uncomplaining den mother, there to manage all the details of their travel arrangements? Or is she the stern, straight-backed woman who is crushing a serpent under her foot while holding a lily, or even the infant Jesus, in her arms? Do you perceive her mainly as an intercessor, the one you turn to when you’re afraid to turn to God and need her help explaining your latest request or transgression? Do you imagine her as the Queen of Heaven, wearing a lovely, flowing robe and jewel-encrusted crown while looking down serenely upon us all from on high?
These are all very clear—and very real—visions of Mary for most of us. They may even be accurate. We have seen these images in Bible illustrations, movies, paintings, and statues in our churches and homes. They are pious, appropriate, and safe images. They are explicable and comprehensible—and very, very constrained.

They also do not do Mary credit. They allow us to make her into what we want, what we need, her to be. They limit and inevitably diminish her, locating her squarely on the narrow road that we need her to travel.

When I was young, though probably not much younger than Mary at the time Gabriel visited her, I was fascinated by a children’s Bible illustration of Mary that has stuck in my mind ever since. She is in a very simple room, presumably the home she shared with her parents, and she is...dusting! Yes, she has a rag in her hand and she is dusting a crude chair set near a crude table. And she is smiling. She is just a girl doing her chores, and I can remember being amazed, not so much at the idea of Mary as a girl doing chores—since I had not yet had so many other, more typical, images imprinted on my brain—but because one of my household chores was to dust the dining room table and chairs.

Mary had to do what I had to do every single day! Not that I did it with a smile, which may say more about me than about Mary, but nevertheless, at that moment she became real to me. Later in the story, of course, Gabriel visited her...perhaps in that very same room while she still held the dust rag. But by then, everything that would happen to Mary going forward carried the background image for me of a girl doing her chores. In other words, I have never been able to forget that she had a life before she became MARY!
Mary was a person, perhaps with hopes and dreams that we will never know about. She was a child, however difficult the life of a child in hard-scrabble Nazareth might have been; nonetheless, she was a girl who lived and ate and made friends and played and learned and helped her parents. And dusted.

Then, suddenly, without any warning, she was so much more. When Mary acquiesced to God’s plan, she became someone else we—because we have sort of co-opted her as our very own—don’t often think about or imagine: a historical figure who quite literally changed the course of humankind. Prophets had described her; complex biblical figures like Sarah, Hannah, and Ruth had prefigured her; and God had prepared for her.

So, she is not just “ours.” And she was certainly no longer just “hers” after Gabriel’s visit. Still, she was a person in her own right, a person of her own time, a person carrying a blessed burden beyond what most women could even comprehend. Which may well be why we imagine her so narrowly. How can we fathom who she was and who she became and how she did it?

Consider this: Mary was betrothed to Joseph at around the age when many of our children are graduating from middle school or entering their freshman year of high school. She was pregnant with Jesus at about the same time we’re worrying about whether our kids paid attention during the sex ed section in their health class. She set out, or perhaps fled, on a difficult, multi-day journey to an older relative she seldom saw and perhaps hardly knew, when we have to drive our kids to the mall or soccer practice a few miles away.
This is the girl-woman who speaks only a few times in the gospels: first, to agree to God’s plan that she bear his Son; second, in a positively effusive prayer of praise, the canticle we have come to call the *Magnificat*; twelve years later, to reproach the boy, Jesus, for making her and Joseph worry; and nearly twenty years later, to nudge her Son into his first public miracle, the changing of water to wine at a wedding. That’s it. We hear no more from Mary. She is there, surely, and we can guess what she may be thinking, but she does not speak to us. And out of this paucity of real information, we have fashioned our images of Mary.

The *Magnificat* gives us Mary on the fault line between what she had been and what she is becoming. It is so much more than a simple prayer of praise. It is the acknowledgment by an immensely important historical figure of what her role is to be; it is Mary’s first and only declaration that she now fully comprehends exactly what is happening: namely, that the entire world has waited for this moment and that her people in particular have waited in both hope and agony for the child she—and she alone—has been chosen to bear.

In these pages, we will meet the Mary who, uncharacteristically it would seem, proclaimed this extraordinary canticle. We will come to know her through her words, and we will explore what they meant for her, for her family, for her people, for history, and for us. Each chapter will address one verse of the *Magnificat* and, please God, bring us into a deeper and more profound understanding of the canticle and its speaker.
And Mary Said

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord...”

Luke 1:46

SETTING THE SCENE

The girl stood at the edge of the small clearing. It was a pretty village, set among the hills of Judea; she had forgotten how pretty. Wild flowers, green trees—so different from her home, Nazareth, in the difficult and distant north. In many ways, it was a different country almost. She had been traveling for almost four days now, and the change had been gradual. She was tired, so tired. And afraid. Just a little afraid. Well, maybe more than a little. It had been some time since she’d visited this place, where her aging relative Elizabeth lived with her even older husband, Zechariah. The homes in this village were set out nicely; they looked inviting. It was easier to make a life here, she thought, than at home.

The girl began to walk slowly toward a particular dwelling. She came to the doorway and stood there, hesitating. Then she saw Elizabeth, and a soft sigh of joyful relief passed through her lips. The older woman inside, hand on
her back, belly distended with the child she bore despite her advanced years, peered at the girl in the dim light, her eyes straining, first in curiosity, then disbelief, then pleasure. She hurried as best she could, waddling a bit, toward the girl who still stood rooted to the spot, not out of rudeness—never that with this girl—but something else.

Abruptly, Elizabeth stopped, and her hand moved from her back to her belly. Her eyes widened, and the arm she had extended to embrace Mary froze in the air. She gasped, though not in pain, as Mary watched closely, hopefully. If Mary hadn’t prevented her, Elizabeth would have fallen to her knees as she cried out in ecstasy, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord has come to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy” (Luke 1:42–44).

**For Mary and her Judean Family**

Imagine Mary’s relief! Within the space of a few weeks, this girl barely into her teens has been visited by one of the most powerful angels of heaven, learned that she has been chosen to bear God’s Son, and probably struggled with euphoria, terror, and wonderment. Gabriel, knowing that though she was without sin, she was not without a human nature, had given her something to hold onto: he told her that her distant relative Elizabeth, known to be well beyond child-bearing years and humiliated because she had not borne Zechariah a son or even a daughter, was pregnant. Wise Gabriel knew enough about human travail to realize he needed to offer a little more: not only
had Elizabeth conceived, she was bearing a son, and she was beyond the typical danger period wherein such an old woman in her first pregnancy was likely to lose the child. Elizabeth, Mary was told, was already in her sixth month. That child, also chosen by God, though for a different purpose, was safe in his mother’s womb.

Mary probably hadn’t immediately been able to take in all that Gabriel had said. The enormity of his revelation about her was too much on its own, and she’d needed more time to absorb the rest of his words. As the immediate anxiety and excitement generated by Gabriel’s visit and words eased just a bit, Mary had begun to wonder about so much. What was happening? How would she cope? What about Joseph, her parents, her neighbors? What would people say? What would they do? Would anyone believe her?

She did not doubt the angel’s words to her—about her—nor did she regret her own acceptance of God’s plan. To do so would have been not only to reject God—unthinkable!—but to betray her people, who had been waiting for centuries for this. Still, she could not quite take it all in, and she found herself focusing on Gabriel’s last words about Elizabeth. She came to think that the angel had given her not only an assurance that needed to be experienced but a way to address her immediate situation.

She needed to get out of Nazareth.

She needed time to understand what she was to do. She needed time to understand how she was to protect God’s Son from those who would not understand, who would not believe. Gabriel had not given her a lot of practical information. How was she to keep the zealots in Nazareth and
its environs from rejecting her and her family, maybe even stoning her as the law of Moses would allow? To them, her conception could well appear as an adulterous or unlawful pregnancy. How would she be able to convince them that a poor girl from Nazareth was to be the fulfillment of prophecies that they had heard and awaited for all their lives, as had their ancestors for generations before? Just as we may have to stretch to imagine the real Mary, so would they have found it difficult to imagine the prophetic virgin as an impoverished peasant with no family or priestly name from an outback region of Israel.

And what would Joseph do? How would he respond? We must remember that at this point, Joseph had not had a dream from God, had not been visited by a messenger assuring him that Mary was pregnant with God's Son and that it was to be his, Joseph's, job to be her husband and protector.

So, when Mary set out on the long, arduous trip from Nazareth to Judea, she was, from a human perspective, simply and starkly alone.

It would have taken several days, depending upon how she traveled, before she finally arrived in Judea, made her way to Elizabeth's house, and stood at the threshold. She had had all that time to think and wonder, hope and pray. Her faith told her that Elizabeth would be pregnant as Gabriel had revealed, but Mary was still human. We must never forget that. Maybe she didn't dust her mother's kitchen table, but she was human. She had chosen to visit Elizabeth not only to give herself time to absorb her own situation, but to follow the lead that Gabriel had given her: "And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also
conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren” (Luke 1:36).

Would Elizabeth be pregnant? Visibly, healthily pregnant?

For Mary, at this point, she had to be! Gabriel had given her that assurance as something to cling to in the coming days of confusion, excitement, and even fear. If Elizabeth was pregnant, Mary could be assured that, as Gabriel had said, “nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

Mary can see as the older woman comes to her that Elizabeth is indeed pregnant and in the full bloom of health. But God gives them both an additional gift. Not only is Elizabeth pregnant with the child who will herald the coming of Mary’s Son; Elizabeth knows! She recognizes that her young relative has not come for a casual visit. Elizabeth, we are told, knows this not on her own, but through the Holy Spirit. After her own child leaps in her womb at the presence of Jesus-in-Mary, Elizabeth was, Luke tells us, “filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry” (Luke 1:41–42).

At that moment, filled with relief and joyous conviction, everything comes together for Mary. Everything she has been taught, everything she knows about Scripture and prophecy, everything she has thought and prayed over since Gabriel’s visitation—all of it merges into the core certainty that will carry her through the trial and turmoil and joy of the rest of her life. She comprehends the magnitude of what God has done, and she makes it her own.

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord.”
For the World

By the time Gabriel visited Mary, and Mary visited Elizabeth and Zechariah, Abraham’s children were a people steeped in despair. After spending the first part of their existence struggling against their own conflicts and the hatred of the desert nations they would displace to inhabit the land God promised them, they enjoyed a period of relative peace and prosperity, at least compared to what had come before and what would come after. But shortly after the great king, David, and his wise son, Solomon, had been, we are told, buried with their ancestors, things started to fall apart for the Hebrew people.

With very few exceptions, the kings that followed were weak, evil, or both. They moved—or followed—the people back into the idolatry that characterized the tribes from which they came. Jealousies and divisions arose, and eventually the people of God split into two nations, often at odds, though sometimes coming together against common enemies. The kingdom of Israel formed to the north, Judah or Judea to the south. Nazareth, considered an outpost of civilized life, was in what was then known as Israel, while the kingdom of Judah possessed the considerable cachet of Jerusalem and the temple, though it was frequently pillaged and even destroyed during those years.

The Jews became a fragmented people, often separated from their God, and prey to their warlike neighbors who had never stopped resenting them for taking the Promised Land. Great prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, Elijah and Elisha, arose to warn the people and to speak of a future Messiah, but they did not have the power, or in reality, the mission from God to reunite the people or free them from
occupying armies. These and many other prophets, however, did increasingly confirm the prophecies of David and Moses, not to mention the veiled promises to Abraham of a coming Messiah who would return the people to their former prosperity and closeness to God.

At the time of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, the Jews were at their collective wits’ end. With a brief respite under the Maccabees, they had spent centuries being passed around and exploited by just about every powerful king and warrior-general in the region. They now struggled under the sandal-boot of Rome, ostensibly ruled by an appointee of Caesar, Herod, whom they despised as an impostor and a false Jew. Their economic burden was immense. While we may complain about taxes, the Hebrew people were oppressed to the point of ruination, paying obscenely high taxes to fund Herod’s hunger for palaces and ostentatious wealth and Rome’s need to fund its infrastructure and empire. The Jews knew nothing of real freedom, either from an economic or a self-governing perspective, and it was simply getting worse and worse.

If there was ever a time for the Messiah, should it not be now?

Such thoughts and hopes were so hot in the hearts and minds of Jews in both the north and south that, in fact, many outliers had arisen to claim, if not that they were the Messiah, that they at least were willing to fight for God’s Messiah so that when he came, he would find a free nation ready to serve him. The Romans, with Herod’s complicity and occasionally active help, had responded to such rebellions by crushing them and publicly crucifying rebel leaders and their followers. Again and again, the
Jews had been disappointed and disillusioned; however, they knew that God would not abandon them. When had he lied to them? Never! When had he not fulfilled his end of any covenant? Never!

It was just a matter of time, and the Jews, from the uneducated shepherd in the field to the cleverest Pharisee, were on the watch. Their history was replete with evidence of the magnitude of God’s power, and now, perhaps more than ever, their need for God’s intervention was magnified.

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

**For Us**

How do we experience Mary today? How do we “hear” or listen to her song of praise? More precisely, how do we hope? Do we have the faith of our religious ancestors, the Jews? Would any of our daughters—any of us—have even a thimbleful of the courage of Mary, Elizabeth, or Zechariah? Do we believe that God is with us? Do we understand, as the Hebrews did at the dawn of Jesus’ coming, how deeply we are in need of God, of the Messiah?

But wait! We have him, don’t we? Isn’t this old news? Charming and moving, certainly, but nonetheless, past history? Even if we rouse ourselves to consider Mary as a girl, a person, an enormously powerful figure of history, even if we study Scripture and fully understand how the entire world awaited the coming of Jesus, even if we become deeply aware of the condition of the Jews and the world at that time—well, that was then and this is now, right? What does it really mean to us?
Everything. **Everything!**

We are in the same condition as the Jews at that time. We are disappointed, disillusioned, and cynical. Believers, later to be called Christians, have been waiting for Jesus’ return, waiting for the Messiah, almost from the moment of the Ascension. They have expected him! They have adored him! They have changed the world in order to at least try to follow him!

Still, as time passed, they—we—experienced the same falling away that the Jews experienced after Moses, and again after David and Solomon. Human nature took over. Jesus’ second coming was taking too long. God was not meeting our expectations—never mind whether we were meeting his expectations. We wanted more immediate gratification. We bickered about teachings and translations. And, OK, if Jesus wasn’t going to be here right away, well then, someone had to run things. But who? Why not me? Or what about him? He’s better than the other guy; his teachings are easier to stomach.

As with the Hebrew people, divisions rent us: envy, ambition, greed, hatred for the “other.” Wars were waged, sometimes even in the name of Jesus, Lord of Peace. Today, we hear talk of end days; entire shelves in bookstores and libraries, not to mention websites, are devoted to novels and prophecies about the end times. People are obsessed with signs and portents, taking Jesus’ words and making what they will of them. Much is made of the violent unrest in the Middle East, as if there has not been violent unrest there since the beginning of time.

We have, it seems, given up the joy of discovering Jesus. We have abdicated our duty to know Mary, to understand
what she understood, to feel what she felt. Despite having every advantage over her because we know the outcome—we know whom she bore and what he would do—many of us can barely muster any joy at that birth without two-months-worth of shopping and trappings to jolt us out of our stupor.

Even in the midst of their sins and offenses, the Jews were given a promise by God: there would be a remnant, a number of people who would still believe, still worship, still wait upon the Lord. Can we not form among us, in each of us, a remnant for our age, for Christianity? Can we not—as Jesus warned us that we must—endure and persevere?

If the gospels are to mean anything to us, if our faith has any real life at all, we must allow ourselves to be stirred, to feel even just a tremor of pure, crystalline excitement, at this first verse of the Magnificat:

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

Praying and Discussing the Magnificat Today

PRAYER

Mary, I pray that you reach out your hand to me—not the alabaster hand of a lifeless statue, but the work-hardened, callused hand of the young girl who had the courage to say “yes” to God. Touch my head and open my mind to the magnitude of your experience and what your faith wrought. Touch my own hands and teach me to open them to others as Jesus instructed me to do. Touch my breast and open my heart to your love and God’s love so that I may become a magnification of the Lord in my life. Amen.
Questions

1. What is the first image that comes into your mind when you think of Mary? When you think beyond that image, does your perspective change at all?

2. What has most influenced you in your perception of Mary? Church teachings? Movies or television? Art? Scripture? How, if at all, does being aware of these influences impact your thoughts about Mary?