

If you don't know it by now, I'm a music person. Music is such a spiritual connector to the depths of my soul. I don't mean to sound dramatic, but it's true. I remember when the Broadway show, *Wicked*, first came out, and I heard the song, *Defying Gravity*, for the first time. The lyrics and notes felt like they spoke directly to me; they empowered me and articulated what I felt. I had had several encounters where I was challenged by my male colleagues not because of my understanding of God or interpretation of scripture but simply by being a female minister. I'd get in my car and sing at the top of my lungs, *Something has changed within me. Something is not the same. I'm through with playing by the rules of someone else's game. Too late for second-guessing. Too late to go back to sleep. It's time to trust my instincts, close my eyes and leap. It's time to try defying gravity. I think I'll try defying gravity. And you can't pull me down. And nobody in all of Oz, no wizard that there is or was is ever gonna bring me down.* This became my fight song- my song reminding me who and whose I am- who has called me for such a time as this. That is, until my niece, Harper Day, was born, and then our fight song became *Roar* by Katy Perry ([listen](#)) and then right after our daughter, Bailey, was born, Rachel Platten's *Fight Song* was released ([listen](#)), and I would blare this while I danced with Bailey. "While you may not have a particular fight song, have you ever noticed that sometimes a song will enter your spirit, and you'll begin to sing, hum, or whistle it, and it empowers you and fills you with hope? For me it is the Ray Charles tune, *The Spirit of Christmas*, that the choir and Charles will sing during the offering. It's a lovely earworm. Sometimes we pay attention to the tune and sometimes the words. I'm in a season where

the lyrics matter. They jump off the page and into my spirit. What songs are you singing these days? As you think about it, let us turn to another song found in scripture. A song that some may argue was the very first Advent hymn or Christmas carol, as it offers us the proper perspective for Advent and Christmas: Mary's song. After hearing her cousin Elizabeth's anointed message, Mary spontaneously burst into her rousing, but reverent carol, reminiscent of Hannah's song from the Old Testament (1 Sam. 2:1-10) as well as nodding to other faithful women such as Miriam, Judith, and Deborah. Mary's song, also called The Magnificat [Latin: magnifies] or the Canticle of Mary, is recorded here in the Gospel of Luke. But first, let us pray. **PRAY. READ. Luke 1:46-55.**

"Defiant. Prophetic. Unsentimental. We like to paint Mary in the softer hues-her robes clean, hair combed and covered, body poised in prayerful surrender-but this young woman was a fierce one, full of strength and fury. When she accepts the dangerous charge before her, (every birth was risky in those days, this one especially so), rather than reciting a maternal blessing, Mary offers a prophecy" (Rachel Held Evans, [blog](#)). It's interesting to me that many in the church portray Mary as meek and mild, docile and unassertive, and yet here in today's passage, there's something remarkably bold and even brazen in these lines of the Magnificat. Let's stop and think for a few minutes about what Mary is singing. Does this sound like the song of a spiritually timid human being? No, this is the song of a young woman on fire for God. This is Mary's fight song- not just for herself but for all of God's creation. In this song, Mary announces the entire theological vision and purpose

of God's coming reign- the promise she carried in her own womb. She "goes all in, betting everything that God's justice will prevail, and love will win. Perhaps more than any other New Testament character, Mary paid attention to the prophets" (Rachel Held Evans, [blog](#)). Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls the Magnificat the most revolutionary Advent Hymn ever sung. Mary's crystal clear in her words of radical, revolutionary hope that when it comes to injustice: God takes sides. Did you know that Mary's lyrics have been banned several times in modern history? For example, when the British ruled India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being sung in churches for fear of a revolt. During the 'Dirty War' in Argentina, after the mothers of disappeared children posterized the capital plaza with the words of the Magnificat, the military junta banned all public displays of the song-same thing happened in Guatemala in the 1980s (Debie Thomas, [journeywithjesus.net](#), "Mary's Song"). And what do you think would happen today if someone sang these words in Syria? Mary's fiery justice song amplifies her understanding of God doing the impossible.

The Magnificat is the only extended speech in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts by a female and the longest speech by a female in the New Testament. Many composers and musicians have been inspired in their work and faith by Mary's words. Here Mary is cast as a prophet- just like her cousin Elizabeth. Isn't it ironic that 14 year-old pregnant, unwed, Jewish "Mary sings her prophetic song on Elizabeth's doorstep, while Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, the 'official spokesperson of God', endured his divine silencing" (Thomas)? "Mary recognized that Jesus'

advent would be a game changer. He became an upside-down gospel of sorts” (Yolanda Denson-Byers, *A Thrill of Hope*). This is why we sang *The Canticle of the Turning* as our opening hymn today. Mary is the voice of the downtrodden. The famous opening lines of her prophecy declare the greatness of the Lord. That’s what magnify means- to declare the greatness of. The Common English Bible translates this, “With all my heart I glorify the Lord!” “Before the Magnificat points to anything else, it points to love and devotion. Specifically, it reminds us that the appropriate response to God’s complicated presence in our lives is love. Not fear. Not guilt. Not penance. Not obligation. *Love*. Indeed, deep and irresistible love is at the heart of the entire Christmas story” (Thomas). Consider the circumstances under which Mary sings- she’s an unmarried, pregnant teenager in a culture that considers it appropriate to stone young women in her condition and she still doesn’t know if her fiancé is going to stick around. And yet, Mary sings of love and praises God’s name. Instead of succumbing to shame, scandal or “woe is me,” “Mary insists that her very body is infused with the presence and power of a God who acts decisively and generously in history. In *her* history. In *her* life” (Thomas). Mary uses personal pronouns here but then changes to encompass the larger community. She focuses on God’s redeeming mercy, justice, and love. Mary, from a poor family, is nowhere near royalty and is indeed among the lowly in society. After all, it’s in Mary’s lowliness that God favors her, not in spite of it. God is near to lowliness; God loves the lost, neglected, unseemly, excluded, weak and broken. How many of us can lean into God’s delight or entertain the possibility that God looks on us with favor as well? Mary does, and she praises God

that she'll be known by future generations as "blessed" because God has done great things for her and holy is God's name. As a pastor, people often tell me that they are not powerful, rich, or educated enough to do great things for God. I am sure all of us have been drowned- or drowned ourselves- in low self-esteem, despair, addiction or self-loathing at times. But Mary's story and fight song can be our story and fight song. There's a song entitled, *Ordinary People*, whose lyrics affirm, "Little becomes much as you place it in the master's hand." Where the world sees insignificance, God sees potential. Look at Mary. She sings from the heart. She magnifies God and then she bursts into an anthem of hope and justice for the world's poorest, most forgotten, most brokenhearted, most oppressed people (Thomas). Mary uses past tense in her prophecy. It's almost as if Mary is calling the people to remember that this is who God is- this is what God's love looks like. Mary is calling down a new order! Scholars indicate that past tense is commonly used in scripture "to express hope in the future" (Harper Bible Commentary). "Prophets almost never get their verb tenses straight, because part of their gift is being able to see the world as God sees it- not divided into things that are already over and things that have not happened yet, but as an eternally unfolding mystery that surprises everyone- maybe even God" (Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 18, *Home By Another Way*). Mary casts a vision of the kingdom of God here on earth. This is the song God has placed in Mary's heart, a song about this world that is turning towards love. And Mary sings her fight song- God's fight song- with gusto! Mary and Elizabeth have both said yes to God, which leads us to wonder what will be asked of us. "Mary may not have known all the details, but

she knows the life growing inside her will make all things new, transforming the world. Mary calls us to be agents of change...to be mini Christ bearers- bringing Christ's love and light into the world. Where does Jesus need to be born in your spheres of influence? Where can you carry him just as you carry a tune? We're commissioned/called to make this our fight song. Yet, "even when we do realize what we're singing, how often do we actually let those words transform our hearts or our actions or our perspectives" (Jim Wallis, *Singing Our Way Back To Hope, Sojourners*).

The more I listen to and read Mary's words, the more I am reminded of modern-day prophets who rewrite lyrics and history. The late theologian, Rachel Held Evans, writes this of another prophet. "On a muggy June morning in South Carolina, a young black woman named Bree Newsome scaled the thirty-foot flagpole outside the state capitol building and removed its Confederate flag. As police and protestors shouted at her from the ground, Newsome, just thirty years old and wearing a helmet and harness, shouted back, 'In the name of Jesus, this flag has to come down. I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today.'" While many have called her crazy (probably like some dismissed Mary), Bree is an artist and is the daughter of the former dean of the School of Divinity at Howard University. On June 27, 2015, ten days after a white supremacist shot and killed nine Black parishioners at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, Newsome removed the flag and was arrested. A Christian, Newsome finds her faith provides her with both guidance and the strength to do her work. Held

Evans writes, “Bree Newsome, in scaling that flagpole, removing the Confederate flag, and declaring God’s reign over and above the centuries-long reign of white supremacy, honored a long and storied tradition of prophetic protest. Her actions helped my generation visualize a better future. She simultaneously revealed things as they are and how they might be.” Like Bree’s actions, Mary’s words remind us that God’s justice and mercy show up counter-culturally and in ways that surprise us and make some of us uncomfortable, hence the reason this song has been banned at key points in history. Mary’s words are words of both hope and judgment. Some of us want to tame or ignore or reinterpret these words to soften them but for some of us...these words are music to our ears. Mary paints a picture of a reordered and renewed world- “a world so beautifully characterized by love and justice, only the Christ she carries in her womb can birth it into being. Isn’t that a world worth singing about? Even if it costs us before it fulfills us” (Thomas)? What is the fight song being sung in our community right now? Who is singing it and how might we use our position and privilege to help this song be heard? “At Mary’s side, we midwife the gleaming truth that we await a baby born who would finally and fully shatter the illusions of greed, violence, and domination. God With Us. The One who brings justice and joy. *Peace and good will*, not retribution and evil intent. That’s Christmas, the very meaning of the Savior’s birth” (Diana Butler Bass, *The Cottage newsletter*). So while we wait...let’s make a joyful noise unto the Lord- together- for Love and Justice are on the way! Amen.