Luke 1:46-56: The Magnificat

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 forever.

In November 2008, Rev. Paul Hugger read The Magnificat as an invocation to a “What Every Church Member Should Know About Poverty” workshop led by Annette Snider. Paul is the hospital chaplain and self-described “community pastor.” He contextualized the reading by saying, “Mary’s song is about justice, and I can’t think of a more appropriate scripture to read as we prepare for Advent and to talk about issues of the poor, poverty, and justice today.”

Rauschenbusch claims that a king decreed The Magnificat be only read in Latin because it was so revolutionary, but Mary’s song made little sense to me, even in English, until that day. I equated The Magnificat with The Rosary and “The Hail Mary” as something only Catholics said, did, or took seriously. The words had been empty until that moment. Now, I cannot think of those words “fills the hungry with good things” without thinking of Paul and Annette, and what the church needs to do to fulfill the promise of Mary. The text’s authorship, the setting, and the content all express

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2 Rauschenbusch, p. 68.
Luke’s message of solidarity with the poor is a primary characteristic of Jesus’ disciples.

It is highly unlikely that Mary penned such eloquent poetry just months after receiving word that she was going to give birth to the Messiah. Scholars believe that neither Luke nor Mary wrote The Magnificat. One cannot deny the similarities the Magnificat has to Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, but Sister Nancy Sell, a Catholic theologian, goes on to say that a group of poor Jewish Christians, the anawim, or “poor ones,” may have written The Magnificat, and Luke attributed it to Mary to be their champion. This Hebrew word only appears 24 times in the Old Testament, but a majority of those times are in the Psalms. Hoppe says the term anawim was a self-designation for the poor to mark themselves as “pious” and “humble” while the rich were “evil” and “wicked.” Anawim were not voluntarily poor nor did they accept their plight. They acknowledged God as their only savior and had absolute confidence that their deliverance was assured. According to Sell, some anawim believed their deliverance came from Jesus. Thus, a community of religious, poor people wrote the canticle and Luke attributed it to Mary. This plausible history accounts for the canticle parallels with Psalms 9 and 10. Mary thus became the anawim’s spokesperson, as the embodiment of their piety.

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5 Hoppe, 128-129.
Catholic bishops of Latin America explain, "The Magnificat mirrors the soul of Mary. In that canticle we find the culmination of the spirituality of Yahweh’s poor and lowly, and of the prophetic strain of the Old Testament. It is the opening proclamation of the Christ’s new Gospel, the prelude to the Sermon on the Mount." The *anawim*, the righteous poor, benefit the most from the birth of Jesus Christ.

The Magnificat offers rich illustrations to comfort to the poor and a mandate for Christians to stand with them. W.D. Davies contends that the Magnificat addresses three issues that primarily affect the poor, though “the poor” are never mentioned by name in the text by name. The themes are:

1) foreign domination, “brought down the powerful from their thrones.”
2) the Diaspora of the Jews, “scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.”
3) the oppression of the poor by the wealthy, “filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

The Magnificat contends that the annunciation and eventual birth of Jesus reverses the circumstances of the world so that those who had been dominated, abandoned, and oppressed now have been empowered, comforted, and filled. The Magnificat is less charity and more revolutionary. While he was cutting out passage of Scripture to make “America’s Bible,” Wallis noted, “Because Mary didn’t sound like a religious service provider with a faith-based federal grant, but instead like a social revolutionary, her prayer had to be cut (from America’s Bible).”

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8 Wallis, 213.
does more than invoke a sense of charity, but rather states a challenge to the status quo. John Wesley spoke of Mary being “under a prophetic impulse,” meaning that she voiced the same concerns for the poor that Amos and Jeremiah had before her. In the *Wesley Study Bible*, a “Life Application Topic” explains, “Wesley, who thought that work among the poor was a means of grace, might well sing along with Mary. God’s name is magnified when the lowly and vulnerable are lifted up in love.” The Magnificat is a call for all Christians to sing with Mary and to lift up the lowly.

While the Magnificat sings the greatness of the Lord and God’s ability to relieve the poor of their burden, the setting of Mary’s song gives a paradigm to how Christians can be in ministry and fulfill the dream. E. Stanley Jones calls the Magnificat, “The most revolutionary document in the world,” and it can only become revolutionary if people stand beside the lowly, just as Elizabeth stood beside Mary. After Mary receives a visit from Gabriel announcing that she is going to give birth to the one human being who will change the world, she goes to visit Elizabeth, her cousin, to be mentored and counseled by her during this time. And she stays there for three months. It is in the context of that relationship with Elizabeth that she is able to sing the Magnificat. As Dr. Kevin Baker, pastor of Reconciliation UMC in Durham, states:

> When these two pregnant women got together, they did more than chat about the radical changes taking place in their bodies. They pointed to the radical changes coming about in history: changes that

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the child in Elizabeth’s womb would prepare for and announce and that the child in Mary’s womb would bring to fruition.\textsuperscript{11}

The relationship between Mary and Elizabeth changed the world. And we, as a church, need to foster these kinds of relationships.

In December 2010, a Circle Leader in crisis called his Ally. He was angry at his girlfriend, stressed out about his life situation in general, and had been drinking. The Ally called the Circles Coach, and the three of them met outside a restaurant in Wilkesboro. The Circle Leader needed someone to talk to regarding his situation. The Ally admittedly had no answers, but he sympathized with his predicament, and made sure the Circle Leader got home safely. The Ally was a God-bearer to the Circle Leader. Just as the Greek Orthodox call Mary, THEOTOKOS, or “God-bearer,” we can be God-bearers to one another. It is through what Wesley calls “Christian conversation” that our true selves can be revealed.

In Luke’s gospel, Mary sets the stage for a total disruption of the current social structure. The Magnificat tells of the hungry being filled, and the rich being sent away empty. When I think of how the poor are sent away from soup kitchens because they have run out, it begs the question, “How can the church allow this to happen?” It is because the church has abandoned our relationships with the poor. Instead of being “Elizabeth’s” to the “Mary’s” of this world, we have looked down with judgment upon the poor and said, “You have done it to yourself.” With that line of thinking, we will always have the poor with us.