

“The Most Powerful”

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December 20, 2015

Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:39-56

If I were to ask you who is the most powerful woman in the world, who would you say? Perhaps you’ve seen the list that Forbes magazine releases annually, most recently in May of this year. Their answer to the question is Angela Merkel. In fact, she’s been at the top of their list of the most powerful women in the world for the last ten years straight. In her third term as Chancellor of Germany, Merkel is the longest serving head of state in the European Union and is its de facto head. She oversees the most thriving economy in the EU and has played an active role in the refugee crisis. She was also just named Time’s Person of the Year for 2015. Merkel certainly seems like a worthy candidate for the title of most powerful woman in the world. Second on Forbes magazine’s list is Hillary Clinton, former senator, former secretary of state and current presidential candidate. Following Clinton is Melinda Gates, Co-chair of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, a leader in philanthropy and global development. Next is Janet Yellen, chair of the Federal Reserve and then Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors. From politics to philanthropy to finance to business, these women truly embody power, and it is no wonder why Forbes listed them as the top 5 most powerful women in the world. The list continues on, accumulating 100 powerful women. In a world which still far-too-often holds women back rather than celebrates them, this is a good list to review. It shows women who have achieved much, often in the face of much adversity, and I am grateful that such a list exists.

But is Forbes magazine correct? Is Angela Merkel really the most powerful woman in the world? Not according to National Geographic Magazine, which recently listed its own winner of that title. Who they picked may surprise you. This woman did not even make the Forbes list. It is none other than one of the women we read about this morning. National Geographic picked *Mary* as the “World’s Most Powerful Woman.” Mary? Really? She was never a leader in politics or finance or business. She was not CEO of any company. She was not ruler of any territory. And, honestly, I think she would shun such talk – powerful? No, Mary was not and is not powerful, at least in our typical definitions of what power is and does. I’d suggest that a better description might be *influential*. As the article in National Geographic Magazine indicates, Mary is everywhere – and though she is certainly more revered in Roman Catholic churches, she is not just influential for Catholics. Mary was right when she said in the text we just read, “Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed” due to the honor God gave her in being the bearer of Jesus. It might surprise you to know that Mary is also honored in Islam, with Mary being the only woman

to have her own *sura*, or chapter in the Koran. Elsewhere in the world around us, marigolds are named for her. In sports, when a quarterback goes for the long throw to try to win the game, it's called a "Hail Mary pass." Millions are drawn to shrines of Mary all around the world. She inspired the creation of many great works of art and architecture, poetry, liturgy, and music, such as the Magnificat which Andrea Pope is singing today.

Mary's song, as recorded in Luke 1:46-55, is a song of praise of God. It is a song of hope. It is a song exalting God's might. It is beautiful. It is an immensely amazing act of courage that such a young girl – perhaps 15 years old – in her setting could come forth with such a profound statement about God and what God has done and will do in the world. We must remember that, given the context of her world, Mary faced the cruel possibility of retribution against her. As an unwed, pregnant teenager, she faced the very real threat of being stoned for adultery. In Matthew's gospel, we read that Joseph planned to dismiss her quietly because he was a "righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace." This is what she is facing and it is *this* Mary, lowly and vulnerable, who is the one who belts forth this triumphant song about God, which is recited or sung around the world two thousand years later.

But, truth be told, Mary's song is not one which is universally loved. Notice what Mary actually sings:

[God] 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.

Good news – as long as you don't happen to be proud or powerful or rich. In those cases, you might not hear these words of Mary in quite the same way. If you are proud and don't wish to be scattered, if you are powerful and don't want to be brought down from your throne, if you are rich and don't want to be sent away empty, then these words do not provide hope and comfort; they are, in fact, a threat. And there are reported instances of the proud and powerful and rich recognizing this threat and declaring the Magnificat off-limits. During the British rule of India, the singing of the Magnificat in church was reportedly prohibited. In the 1980s, the government of Guatemala is said to have banned any public recitation of Mary's words. The junta in Argentina is reported to have banned Mary's song after the Mothers of the Disappeared displayed its words on placards in the capital plaza. Yes, the powerful do not relinquish power easily. Staying on their thrones is much preferred. The rich do not like to be sent away empty. Staying well-fed is much preferred. Herod follows the expected script for a ruler when he hears about the birth of this so-called Messiah – he tries to find him to eliminate this threat. Rulers today – in whatever sphere they rule – follow the expected script, as well. When their rule is challenged, they often go on the offensive, lashing out at others in whatever way they can. No, the powerful rarely step down from their thrones willingly, and this is why the song of

Mary is not just some nice Christmas carol. This song of Mary is revolutionary. Mary understands the birth of Jesus to inaugurate a new day, a day in which the whole world is turned upside down. And turning the world upside down is not a harmless, peaceful task. It is not something which will be done without upsetting the current system, a system which benefits the wealthy and powerful, so we can count on them doing everything they can to resist the subversive nature of this revolution.

Mary longed for a better world, a world in tune with God's intentions. She understood that living under oppression was no way to live, that there was no reason that the poor should go hungry while the rich ate more than their fill, that those wielding power unjustly had no right to be in power. And Mary saw all of this as coming to fruition through the birth of her son.

What do *we* see this Christmas? Do we see the revolutionary impact of the coming of the Messiah, or do we more often see the list of gifts yet to be bought? Do we see the hopeful possibilities of a world turned upside down, or are we much more comfortable with the status quo? Do we see the in breaking of a society built on justice, equality, and respect, or do we prefer the current society built on fear of others, inequality, and maintaining power at all costs?

Just when we are getting so close to the joy of Christmas Day, Mary sneaks into our Advent preparations and sings of revolution. Perhaps if she just said that God has shown great strength, we'd be fine, but she continues to say "he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts." Maybe if she stopped at saying God has filled the hungry with good things, we'd be OK, but she continues to say "and sent the rich away empty." Perhaps if she only said that he has lifted up the lowly, we wouldn't be so concerned, but she also says "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones." And the truth is that she is singing about many of us. *We* are often the ones who are proud, rich and powerful. We are often the ones whose lives will be affected if God's order truly comes to pass, and so we sometimes provide lip service to following in the way of the Messiah, when to do so would actually remove us from our thrones.

This Christmas, will we be content with the status quo, or we will join in the work of our God in upending systems of injustice, where the wealthy get wealthier at the expense of the poor, where people are treated unfairly because of the color of their skin, where xenophobia runs rampant, where those of different religions are demeaned and lumped together as terrorists, where the cry is to keep out refugees, forgetting that Jesus and his family themselves had to flee to Egypt to escape the violence of Herod? Mary makes clear which side God is on and where we should align ourselves if we are going to follow the reign of the Messiah.

Mary is the most powerful woman in the world? Really? She's just a poor young unwed mother who gives birth in a stable. She's a nobody in a world of emperors and military might. She is poor in a world which values wealth. She is female in a world which values males. She is pregnant and unwed in a world in which she can be stoned for that offense. And yet, despite her lowly status – no, *because of* her lowly status – God has exalted her. As Mary says, “he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” And Mary is honored the world over. Maybe National Geographic Magazine is on to something, but I suppose it would be much clearer if those of us who call ourselves Christian would get in line with promoting her radical vision of a world turned upside down. Or, perhaps better said, a world at last turned *right-side up*, a world which embodies the humility and justice and equality of the incarnation of Jesus, God-with-us.

Mary's song is known as the Magnificat because of the first word of the Latin translation of the word magnify. Mary says “my soul magnifies the Lord.” To magnify has two definitions: the more religious definition is to glorify, but the more standard definition is to make something easier to see by enlarging our view of it. Mary sings of praise of God, but maybe she's also singing of how she will enable others to see God. So, what will *we* magnify during these final days of Advent and into the season of Christmas? My prayer is that we will all seek to see the image of the Christ in ourselves and in others so that we will magnify the goodness, justice, grace, and mercy of our God, this Christmas and always. Amen.