

Marjory Zoet Bankson: From Generation to Generation

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

By Marjory Zoet Bankson

From Generation to Generation

Text: Luke 1: 47-55

*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 his descendants forever.*

Intro:

After three weeks of Advent waiting, suddenly we are standing on the brink of Christmas. All of creation takes a deep breath. The lights go down. The great curtains sweep back and, through a cold starry night, we hear the clear pure voice of Mary singing her canticle of praise: *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...*

She is alone on a bare stage, barely visible in silhouette. Because we know the story, we have already turned our attention toward the child. But wait ... Who is this woman? What is she saying? *My soul magnifies the Lord...*

My dictionary says magnify means to concentrate and enlarge. We might say Mary "embodies" or "incarnates" the Word that came to her, making it visible and tangible with her physical body. She is called to be a **witness** to the power and presence of God in the world.

I. Call to a Conscious Self

Hanging above the altar this morning, we have [Deborah Sokolove's](#) version of the "Virgin of Guadalupe." These Mary figures are found throughout the Southwest, and in Central and South America. Typically, Mary is standing on a new moon in a starry sky or she is clothed in a star-filled cape, with a spiky golden aura emanating from her body. She is dark-skinned. No child is present. In Jungian terms, she is truly a Virgin figure – a woman unto herself – beckoning each one of us toward conscious embodiment of God's call. For men, we might name that Hero or Warrior energy – solitary, set apart for a mission.

Mary's Magnificat is not about the baby Jesus; it is about her own relationship with God, her call to consciousness and purpose. It is the birth of her soul to be in relationship with God this way!

Story: For several weeks now, Deborah has been laughing at herself, for keeping two calendars – one for her graduate work at Drew and one at home with her other engagements. On one, she scheduled her comps. On the other, she scheduled the opening of her one-person show at the Potters House, not aware they were just one day apart. One requires words – lots of them – in reasoned, logical categories. The other requires the best of her intuitive artistic sensibility. Unconsciously she kept them apart because she needed to focus on one at a time.

As I working on this sermon, aware that I wanted to use Deborah's image of the Virgin as an icon for Mary's Magnificat, I realized that the Spirit has come to Deborah as it did to Mary, calling her into a new and larger Self. The tension between her doctoral studies on one hand, and her liturgical art on the other, actually stretches the vessel of her life to make room for the larger Self that God is calling forth. Like Mary, Deborah is living out the story of God's call to a larger, more conscious life.

We can expect the same dynamic in our community. On one hand, we feel a greater push for clear verbal description of who we are and what we are about. On the other, we feel a yearning for the creative life of art and dance and poetry, creating the container for the soul of Seekers to be conscious of itself.

When Mary responded to the angel of God, she stood out from the crowd. She claimed her call. Truly, she became a **virgin** in the Jungian sense of emerging from the unconscious matrix of the Great Mother. It has nothing to do with whether she has ever slept with a man. This woman has a voice of her own, a soul of her own. This morning, listen for the whisper of Spirit in your flesh, calling you to gather the scattered pieces of your life into one place – one voice, one body, one birth.

II. From Generation to Generation

Mary's Magnificat is set in the opening scene of Luke's Gospel, which was written for Gentiles like us. Luke is the only one of the four Gospel writers to include the so-called "infancy narrative," – that is, the story of Jesus' birth and childhood. We might ask ourselves why Luke added these birth stories to the record which Mark and Matthew had already compiled of Jesus' life, but I don't want to get bogged down with that speculation right now. I want to focus on the obvious themes in Mary's song. The next is **living in a longer story**:

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed...and His mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation.

Understanding our lives and our actions from the standpoint of "all generations" is another example of how embodied Mary's song really is. She is not simply saying that God has blessed her, but that children of the future will thank her and honor her for the decision she has made to say **yes** with her life.

As a modern American woman with no biological children, I might be tempted to imagine that my life makes no difference to future generations. In fact, I think that belief is behind much of the self-indulgence that we see in our society. – "As long as I'm not hurting someone else, what I do doesn't matter." However, that is not what Mary's Magnificat says. She claims the life of even the "most lowly servant" matters in God's cosmic story of creation "from generation to generation."

Story: In families, we have the power to bless each other in very ordinary ways. Four months ago, my mother broke her arm and, because she could not care for herself, she had to move from independent living in a retirement center to assisted

living in a nursing home on the other side of town. Most of her things went into storage, because she is now living in one room with very limited mobility. Generations split apart in our society, because we live so far apart.

When I was out in Bellingham six weeks ago, we got the news that her arms were not healing. She was discouraged, because the doctors knew she probably would not survive surgery, so she faced the possibility of living with a broken arm in a sling-and we all thought it would not be long.

However, something happened. The Spirit of life arrived, unexpected and mysterious She had said she did not want any presents because there was no room for anything more, so one sister sent her homemade fruitcake and the other sent her cookies. I had not gotten her anything.

Then she went to the doctor last week and got the good news from an x-ray that, after all this time, her arm had healed! Moreover, when I asked her if she needed something I could get for her, she said in a funny voice, "Yes, actually I need a winter coat so I can go outside."

Therefore, I went to the Burlington Coat Factory and bought her a beautiful bright red coat with a velvet collar – because it is a sign of new life. She opened the package yesterday and told me that it fit perfectly! So she will wear it on Christmas Day when she goes back to where she was living before, to have Christmas dinner with her old table-mates...generations restored in a new way.

Individually and collectively, our choices do matter in shaping life on this planet, but it takes a COMMON STORY to know that. The biblical story tells me much about human life and community called together beyond biological lines. Earth's story stretches father back into geologic time, telling its tale in tree rings and water marks, genetic codes and crystal structures. We are part of that story too. Our choices matter

to future generations who are also part of our story.

It is not news that fossil fuels are getting scarce, that nuclear waste remains toxic long after the containers will have decomposed, that we are polluting the planet and destroying our habitat. Most of us try to be good stewards of the resources we have – we think before buying, recycle things, separate our garbage – but it hardly makes a dent in the ballot for survival.

Story: This week, I also got a clipping from the newspaper in Bellingham, Washington, where my mother still lives. The headline said "Georgia Pacific Closes!" In addition, the article detailed a fourfold rise in energy costs, which has put this pulp and paper plant out of business. Four hundred people out of work a month before Christmas. This happened in a part of the country where electric power has been cheap and plentiful because of huge dams along the Snake and Columbia Rivers. At the same time, we are beginning to be conscious that the Pacific salmon is nearly extinct – because their wild river spawning grounds have been tamed to fill our appetites for irrigation water and electricity. Local Indians have begun to campaign for removal of the dams to save the salmon – and it is just one example among many.

It would be easy to shrug our shoulders in despair or turn our faces toward the daily problems we all have, but Mary's Magnificat calls to us from a larger perspective and a longer timeframe – from generation to generation.

Soul work is not just about individual consciousness. It is about participating in the mystery of life itself! It is about cultivating the artist, the mystic, responding with a child's wonder to unexpected revelations and hidden rainbows. I see that in Keith's photography show [upstairs](#) – and in Covey's glee at carving an elaborate pumpkin with Peter on the Seekers overnight. **Living with creation's story and the biblical story helps to put things in perspectives so we can choose what is**

truly life giving and let the rest go!

One small example is how we will use the space at Carroll Street. Peter came back from the opening of the art show in the municipal building for Takoma Park where Liz Vail has several paintings and said with some excitement, "I think Seekers will be able to offer even better space to encourage local artists. I think that's part of our mission to the community!" If we can live in the light of "the seventh generation" ahead of us, I believe that Seekers will make a positive contribution the life in this city and further.

III. Social Order

Finally, Mary's Magnificat gives us a clear vision of God's intention for the social order:

*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.*

It is a vision of equality and social justice, of basic sustenance for all – another theme which pervades Luke's Gospel.

Vicky Robbins, co-author with Joe Dominguez of *Your Money or Your Life*, suggests that the way we work with **money** is the single most important way we will influence generations hence. How we not only spend our money or give it to organizations we believe in, but how much life-energy are we giving in exchange for money that we think we need. These are all conversations we could be having at Seekers **because we know we live in God's story of continuing creation.**

James D. Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank, reminded me of this dimension of Mary's song when I read an article in the Post on Friday. Titled "Beyond the Jubilee." Wolfensohn says

that debt relief for 20 of the world's poorest countries was inspired by the biblical concept of Jubilee and pressed by many religious groups.

Many social activists have attacked the World Bank for using its power to bolster corrupt leaders and not, in fact, benefit the poorest people in those countries. Nevertheless, I am also aware of its tremendous power to "lift up the lowly" and "fill the hungry" as well as curbing graft and corruption among local in developing countries. Walter Wink reminds us that institutions were created to carry out God's mission and, like individuals, they often forget their purpose – and must be redeemed.

The World Bank has used its influence to lift the burden of making interest payments from 20 countries that need to use their meager resources to help their own people build a sustainable future. The question is whether they will use that power for those who come "hungry to the Lord's Table." We have members here who are actively involved in international development and part of our **witness** to Mary's Magnificat will be to press for God's vision of equality and justice in using the world's resources. I hope Meg or Diane will help us understand more about this in the future.

Story: When 10 of us from this congregation visited Dr. Vicky Guzman in El Salvador, we saw the difference that small loans could make to local entrepreneurs, especially women, who wanted to develop small commercial enterprises. Men in that country could get bank loans at what we considered an exorbitant rate of 23%. Women simply could not get loans commercially, so they were forced to deal with local money-lenders who would charge up to 50%, often compounded monthly. We saw the dignity and self-respect that came to women and men who were able to borrow and repay small loans from Dr. Vicky's micro-enterprise program.

I want to celebrate our community decision to continue our

external giving at its present level – which includes a contribution of \$3,000 to Dr. Vicky's efforts in El Salvador – even as we give and loan money for Seekers to pay for our new home in Takoma. That represents our commitment to embody the vision that Mary sang out so long ago – and raises the possibility that we could do more in this area.

Some say we are living in a post-Christian era. I would like to suggest that we have not tried it yet. That in fact, we are living in a PRE-CHRISTIAN era. On this Christmas Eve at the beginning of the 21st century, perhaps we too will hear the Spirit whispering in the dark corners of our lives

- to claim our Virgin/Warrior energy and say YES to God's call;
- to embrace the biblical story as part of God's cosmic creation story – and know that our choices do matter "from generation to generation";
- to live God's vision through institutional structures that we may not have created – but which can be redeemed for their true purpose when we speak truth to power...as Mary did.

Amen.