The politics of Mary
A sermon on Luke 1:5–56

Isaac Villegas

"The Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly," Mary sings. "God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52).

There was a famous book, written in the 1970s, called *The Politics of Jesus*. You may have read it. The book shows how Jesus was a political figure, and how following Jesus has everything to do with our politics. Discipleship is political. That was the argument. There have been more recent books, with titles like *The Politics of God* and *God's Politics*, all of them explaining how life with God affects our political involvement.[1]

I'm waiting for the book on the politics of Mary, this young woman who all of a sudden finds herself at the center of God's plan for the transformation of all things, the center of God's liberation, of God's revolution.

I'm waiting for the book on the politics of Mary, this peasant woman whom we hear from today in our scriptures. She is a young woman, living under occupation, eking out a life in the midst of a violent empire, a marginal figure in her society, without power, without status, without a voice, without a future. This young woman who all of a sudden finds herself at the center of God's plan for the world, the center of God's transformation of all things, the center of God's liberation, of God's revolution, of God's work of salvation. Her life is at the beginning of the gospel story. She's the one who ushers in the politics of Jesus. Mary comes first.

"Here I am," she says to the angel Gabriel, the messenger of God. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). In the Gospels, Mary is the first to say yes to God, yes to God's word, yes to Jesus. She's the one who welcomes God, who receives the Lord.[2] She becomes a priest, announcing God's salvation and offering her body to make

God's presence available to the world. She offers God. She offers communion with God. She offers the sacrament of Christ, with her body. She is the host of the host.

If I were to talk like a Roman Catholic, I'd say that in Mary's body the Eucharist is consecrated by the Holy Spirit who comes upon her, and that her womb breaks open in a sacrificial offering: the body of Christ, broken for you; the blood of Christ, shed for you. Mary, her body, broken and bloody, there in Bethlehem, on the first Christmas, bearing in her arms our salvation, the Christ child, who brings us into eternal communion with God. Mary, our first priest.[3]

Mary's the one who welcomes God, who receives the Lord. She becomes a priest, announcing God's salvation and offering her body to make God's presence available to the world. She offers communion with God.

Since I'm talking like a Catholic, let me tell you about Louise Margaret Claret, a French nun who lived in a convent in La Touche, a small community in the southeast of France. Mother Claret was known as a minister to priests, offering her prayers and counsel to them. In 1904, on Christmas Eve, she had a vision, a vision of the first Christmas, of the birth of Jesus as the priesthood of Mary. Mother Claret saw the newborn Jesus, she said, held in Mary's hands, as she lifted him up to God, as if officiating at a mass, at the Lord's Table, holding up the bread of the Eucharist. "This was the first mass of Mary," Claret wrote, "in the silence of the stable. . . . Mary became a priest that day, with the power . . . and the right to touch his body."[4]

To talk about Mary's politics, we have to begin with who she is, with her life, with her body, her gendered body.[5] We begin with God choosing her as the first priest of the church, the first one to offer Christ to the world, to receive Jesus into her life and to share him with others. To receive and to give. To let Christ dwell in her and to offer him to the world. And we are invited to become like Mary. We become priests like Mary—welcoming God into the world, and sharing God. Sharing God with our lives, in what we do and what we say.

It's the "what we say" part that jumps out at us in our passages from Luke's Gospel. Mary sings her words. "The Magnificat," we call it. She preaches with a song—a song of joy.

What surprises me is that we get to hear Mary at all. What surprises me is that she shows up in the story, that we can hear Mary's song, that in a world of men writing about men, an author gives us a woman's voice, a woman's story. That's rare in the ancient world.

Mary's voice is amplified by the way Zechariah is silenced earlier in the same chapter.[6] The angel Gabriel comes to him, to Zechariah, a priest doing his priestly duties inside the temple, and the angel shuts him up. He takes away Zechariah's voice: "You will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur," the angel says (Luke 1:20).

What surprises me is that Mary is that in a world of men writing about men, an author gives us a woman's voice, a woman's story. And Mary's voice is amplified by the way Zechariah is silenced. Politics is about who has a voice, who can speak, whom we listen to.

While this is going on, while Zechariah is being silenced in the temple, the people are gathered outside, waiting for their priest to emerge and speak God's blessing. "When he did come out," it says, "he could not speak to them. . . . He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak" (Luke 1:22).

The man has an important job to do for the people, and they're waiting for him, but he can't say the words. He can't offer God's blessing, God's absolution, God's forgiveness. So he flails around in front of the people, trying to say something with his arms and hands, but saying nothing. Nothing but silence. The scene ends with Zechariah looking so pitiable, as he stands there, speechless and bewildered.

"When his time of service was ended," it says, "he went to his house" (Luke 1:23). He's got nothing to offer, so he goes home. He's rendered powerless. And his powerlessness makes clear who has power in the story. Not Zechariah, not this priest, but another one: the priest in a stable, the woman who holds God in her arms, the gift of salvation for the world. To borrow words from Mary's song: *God has brought down the powerful, and lifted up the lowly* (Luke 1:52).

Politics is about who has a voice, who can speak, who has power, whom we listen to. And in this Advent story, it's Mary. She's the one. Not only can we hear her speak, but she speaks

with authority: "Truly," she says in her song, "from now on all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48). She has the audacity to tell us to revere her, to call her blessed. She knows who she is. She knows her role in the story. She knows what God has done—not just for her, but for all of us through her. What God has done with her will mean a new world, a world where the powerful will be brought down from their thrones and the lowly will be lifted up, a world where the lives of the hungry will be filled with good things and the rich will be sent away empty.

These are the politics of Mary: the politics of a great reversal, a world turned upside-down. Or maybe we should say, a world turned right-side-up. A restored world, full of God's goodness, full of abundant life.

These are the politics of Mary: the politics of a great reversal, a world turned upside-down. Or maybe we should say, a world turned right-side-up. A restored world, full of God's goodness, full of abundant life. A world very different from the one we have, where, we found out this week, the CIA has been torturing people and that most Christians in the United States approve of such practices,[7] a world where 132 school children in Pakistan were killed by a band of outlaws,[8] a world where police kill unarmed black people,[9] and a world where in retaliation[10] police officers become targets as cycles of violence spin our society out of anyone's control. A society where many people have guns and are more and more inclined to use them.[11] We need Mary's song now more than ever. We need the advent of a new world, not this one.

For as long as I can remember, I've been drawn to the subversive visions in the Bible, the stories of great upheaval, of Jesus and his apocalyptic ministry, overturning tables. Woe to you who are rich, woe to you are full, and woe to you who are laughing now, he says, for you will be hungry; you will mourn and weep (Luke 6:20–26).

I think Jesus learned his prophetic ministry from his mother. She was the one who said, "The Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52–53). Jesus learned his prophetic words, his apocalyptic vision, when he was a child. Imagine Jesus as a baby, fussing at bedtime, and Mary, holding him in her arms, whispering a song to

him, her song, comforting him with dreams of revolution—the Magnificat as her lullaby.

When I think about Mary's song this year, I'm drawn to something I didn't notice before, a theme I didn't see every other time I've read this text, a word that Mary says twice: mercy. She sings about mercy: "God's mercy . . . from generation to generation" (Luke 1:50). Her song is "in remembrance of God's mercy" (Luke 1:54).

We need God's mercy, in our lives and in the world. Mercy—the miracle that comes over us and allows us to forgive. To forgive as a way to make room for a relationship, a relationship with someone close to you whom you don't know how to love anymore, whom you don't know how to care for anymore. Mercy is the miracle of restoration, of trying again and again at a relationship, even though you've been wronged, even though you've wronged another.

When I think about Mary's song, I'm drawn to a word that Mary says twice: mercy. We need God's mercy, in our lives and in the world.

We need mercy, not just in our lives at home or at work or here at church, but also in the world, where people kill or threaten to kill one another. Mercy, not militarized police in riot gear. Mercy, not a troubled man with a gun, lashing out in revenge. But none of them are listening to my sermon today, and I have my doubts that if they were, they would be overcome with mercy and give up their guns and military-grade weapons.

So, today, I'm hoping that God is here, and that God listens, and that if God doesn't listen to me, that maybe God will listen to Mary, the one who cried out for mercy, who trusted in mercy, who gave her life to mercy, to the faithful mercy of God, from generation to generation.

My hope is that God listens to Mary, and that the Son whom she bore will come among us again, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and save us from ourselves, from our self-destruction, from our cycles of revenge, as violence begets more violence, here and everywhere.

Only God can save us, with a mercy that cleanses us of our desire to punish.

During Christmas we remember a gift, the gift of mercy in the flesh, Jesus Christ, the one who forgave his enemies from the

cross, so that we may come to know the kind of life that leads to life, not death—the kind of life that reveals the mercy of God.

Notes

[1] John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992); Jim Wallis, *God's Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

[2] Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 76–78.

[3] For the priesthood of Mary within Roman Catholic discourse, see "Eve, Mary and the Priesthood," chapter 8 in *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, by Tina Beattie (London: Continuum, 2002), 194–208.

[4] Quoted in Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 200. "Jesus came into the world. . . . She took him between her virginal hands, and lifting him towards the heavenly Father, offered herself her first sacrifice. Oh! This first Mass of Mary in the silence of the stable . . . infinite cost of sacrifice." "She became a priest that day, the Immaculate Virgin; she received, as well as priests, the power to sacrifice Jesus, the right to touch his body. . . She rested for nine months . . . preparing herself for . . . [the] infinite cost of this sacrifice."

[5] In *The Politics of Jesus*, John H. Yoder starts with Mary, but he only gives her a paragraph at the beginning of chapter 2. She functions as only an introduction to Jesus, not as a significant character in herself. If Yoder would have paid more attention to Mary, he would have had to give the politics of gender a significant place in his account of the nature of violence—both at the macropolitical and micropolitical levels.

[6] At a church small group meeting, Melissa Florer-Bixler made this point to me—that Zechariah's silence and Mary's song must be read together, as part of Luke's feminist disposition. Also see Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997): "Mary's response to the divine announcement contrasts sharply with that of Zechariah, with the result that she, surprisingly in the scenes of this type, has the last word" (92).

[7] Sarah Posner, "Christians More Supportive of Torture than Non-Religious Americans," *Religion Dispatches*, December 16, 2014, http://religiondispatches.org/christians-more-supportive-of-torture-than-non-religious-americans/.

[8] Declan Walsh, "Taliban Besiege Pakistan School, Leaving 145 Dead," *New York Times*, December 16, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/17/world/asia/taliban-attack-pakistani-school.html?.

[9] See http://mappingpoliceviolence.org/unarmed/.

[10] "Two N.Y.P.D. Officers Killed in Brooklyn Ambush; Suspect Commits Suicide," *New York Times*, December 20, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/nyregion/two-police-officers-shot-in-their-patrol-car-in-brooklyn.html.

[11] Editorial Board, "End the Gun Epidemic in America," *New York Times*, December 4, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/05/opinion/end-the-gun-epidemic-in-america.html.

About the author

Isaac S. Villegas is pastor of Chapel Hill (North Carolina) Mennonite Fellowship, where he preached a version of this sermon on December 21, 2014.