

“THE MOST POWERFUL WOMAN IN THE WORLD”

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Sorry, Angela Merkel. Apologies, Janet Yellen. No offense, Hillary or Oprah. The National Geographic recently named Mary, mother of Jesus, as the most powerful woman in the world. Why? Because of her ongoing influence and popularity. But do Mary's words and example have a prayer of being heard in this dark time?

Last week a national candidate, spoiling with bravado, promised us WWII, like it was some favor. We hear this kind of chest-beating so often, we grow numb to it. We can try to soften that or tone it down, but then we remember San Bernardino. Pope Francis, with sadness instead, has called these times “a piecemeal WWII.”

Indeed, this is a time of war. We've been engaged in near steady warfare since Sept. 11, 2001. A generation has grown up and is taking charge of a society with war waging their entire lives. In a few decades, we'll learn what all of that means.

Politicians avoid calculating the personal, social, and monetary costs of war. But military historian Andrew Bacevich, a friend of my former Cape Cod associate pastor, estimates the escalation advocated against the Islamic State—a permanent “generational war” using vast strength to subdue Syria and Iraq—would require quintupling the size of the US Army and tripling our defense budget. At least they spared us the blustery deceit of disgraced terms like “shock and awe.”

Politicians don't talk about how war's victims lie not only on faraway battlefields but also in alleyways and public-health clinics at home. Who will pay the costs, if those in power to decide determine the cost of more and more war to be worth it?

Hold onto such thoughts and now consider Mary. Luke's Gospel recognizes the mother of Jesus as living in an occupied land. She had to watch what she said in public. But after learning she would bear the Son of God, designated for the long-vacant throne of Israel's celebrated King David, she retreated to a secluded space with her relative Elizabeth. There Mary made her revolutionary declaration.

Mary's song, the Magnificat, makes some of the most potent claims in the Bible. It is radical. Its imagery remembers, celebrates and anticipates events that are revolutionary in the purest sense. Kings removed from their thrones. The lowly elevated and dignified. The hungry filled. The rich lose the control money gives.

Mary isn't the usual agitator. She's not absurdly brave. She's just fed up with how things are. Yearning for change, she wants to hold God accountable to be God. What sets Mary apart is her vision of a world God has not forgotten. She reminds God he's a God unafraid of taking sides, a God loyal to the weak and powerless.

You know, like how God didn't stand on the sidelines as Pharaoh ground God's chosen people down into the dust but called Moses to miraculously liberate them.

Planning to lead my first Global Village Work Trip in the 1988, I called Habitat for Humanity and asked them where they most needed groups to travel and build. Uh, Nicaragua, they said. We can't get anyone to go there. Yeah, I get that, I said, as the contra war was still fuming along, funded by our tax dollars. Can you guarantee our safety? Yes, they gushed, we will keep you far from the fighting.

We went and built in Matagalpa, where the Sandinista revolution originated. And Habitat was true to their word, as we were never in peril, except from the water. Nicaragua sorely needs homes, as that land just trails Haiti in its level of poverty.

One fascinating, befuddling part of that first trip was how the politics of revolution affected and warped perceptions of our going. Remember, we went because of Nicaragua's extreme poverty and Habitat begged us to go there. But the liberals blessed us because the Sandinistas would bring God's reign, or so they thought. Never mind as they were voted out of office years later, they stole a lot of property belonging to "the people." Journalists dubbed it the "piñata." Conservatives cursed our going as communistic because we were complicit with a rogue state threatening our way of life. Never mind one year after we returned, communism completely collapsed, as it was empty and bankrupt in every way of measuring it. The moral of the story is filtering theology through the left side of this versus the right side of that only confuses and weakens and corrupts the church's witness.

Some in our recent time of war will hear Mary's words and clumsily apply them. They will subvert her rhetoric about God getting God's way to protect and advance their own agenda. That's ironic, given that Mary's revolution isn't about the rights of one group over another, about self-interest's eternal tug of war. Mary's revolution is about God finally having God's way with us. It is about God-interest. No one group owns that, even if God does mean to start with the poor and lowly.

Carrying Jesus, Mary considers current conditions, searches her soul, and concludes: God is about to do something. God will transform this blighted landscape of the status quo. Her pregnancy and hope are all the proof she needs: no way will God's Messiah leave the current state of affairs as they are, where the powerful run roughshod over the weak. With Jesus is coming, something's gotta give.

With that Habitat trip to Nicaragua, I can relate to how Mary must have felt like a bit player in a geopolitical drama starring gods, emperors, elites, and generals. How could we make a difference? How can Mary's vision matter? Wasn't she just another idealistic teenager dreaming of a future out of touch with the real world? No, that's wrong. For Mary doesn't imagine a changed reality. Mary demands it. Notice how Mary's view of God won't resign itself to the current state of affairs. She refuses to view long-term suffering and the permanent proliferation of victims as sacrifice a people must offer to protect the status quo in exchange for security.

Have you ever noticed how in the poetry of a song you can get away with saying so much more than in the everyday prose in which we typically communicate? Notice that it is no sweet, lilting lullaby that pregnant Mary sings to Elizabeth. Rather, bearing Jesus into the world, it is more a call to action that Mary sings. Our God is on the move. God is providing long-awaited answers, transnationally.

Advent tunes us into Mary's grasp of who God is and what God will accomplish. Prof. Matthew Skinner, whose thinking shaped mine this morning, writes: "This young woman's restlessness beautifully characterizes Advent--not a season of slowing down or shopping, but a time when Christians see the world and shout to God, 'Enough already!' ... Its lyrics expose how docile and faltering we are in comparison to Mary. Therein lies her power. About her, poet Thomas John Carlisle said: "An offense against our apathy, this pathetic refugee mother." The 17th century poet George Herbert noticed we can reshuffle the name Mary to "army."

Mary's song affirms feeding the hungry at the Open Door Shelter or talk of building homes with the poor as perfectly aligned with celebrating the coming Messiah

One final note relating baby Brooks and baby Jesus, and things that get said in this sad world. I recall when I was Scott and Casey's age, with small daughters, how people my age now would unctuously pontificate by saying, "I am sure glad that I don't have to bring children into such a world as we are living in right now."

That is a cold blessing for generations succeeding us. It is full of the haughtiness and superiority Mary assailed in her song. Spare us your alligator tears! For the truth is, human nature has not measurably changed since Mary bore Jesus. The world was in deep trouble then, and the world remains in deep trouble now. And we cannot fix it by ourselves and without the transformative peace, hope, love and joy of God that we have been rehearsing with this wreath in recent Sundays.

The best response to such galling despair is the cross-stitched sampler hanging in nurseries with Carl Sandburg words: "A baby is God's opinion that this world should go on." God bless you, Scott and Casey. And God bless all families like Mary and Joseph trying to make your way while carrying these bundles of hope.

Know that the God Mary proclaims is no idler. This God is determined to have his way. And I'm betting that God will. How's that for celebrating Christmas? Amen.