



**SOUTHWESTERN  
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SYNOD** EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN  
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# SUMMER SERMON SERIES

SERVICE 3 of 3 | **MARY: THE CANTICLE LEADER**

## **SERMON TRANSCRIPT**

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The grace and peace of our Lord Jesus be with you all.

Context is everything. Preachers know this. It matters who it is you're preaching to and when it is you're doing it, which makes a recorded sermon like this one a real challenge. The context of our world is changing so rapidly that what was a timely word one week ago can seem painfully out of date today.

I am writing and recording this sermon in the context of the persistent protests over the murder of George Floyd. This may still be the context of our world when you hear this sermon, or our world may have changed again in significant ways I cannot now imagine. But I am comforted by this conviction: the context into which Mary, the mother of our Lord, sang her Magnificat is familiar to people of every time and every place. And in that sense, her story is always a timely one for the people of God to hear.

Mary sings of the proud, the powerful and the rich. People of every age hear her song and resonate with it. “Yes, I know who you’re singing about, Mary. I can put names and faces to the proud, the powerful and the rich you sing about.” And Mary sings of the lowly and the hungry. And again, people of every time and place can bring to their minds the names and faces of people who are hungry and poor, people we would identify today as marginalized.

Listen again to the centerpiece of Mary’s song: “You have scattered the proud and brought down the powerful from their thrones. You have lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things.” In the context of two solid weeks of daily protests, it’s not hard to hear these words in a call-and-response style chant. I can imagine thousands of people standing in the street in protest, holding signs and calling out phrases like these:

Scatter the proud!	Lift up the lowly!
Scatter the proud!	Lift up the lowly!

In the context of daily street protests, we should not fail to hear how precisely the Magnificat fits this style of public advocacy.

We should also not fail to hear and distinguish the Law and the Gospel in the song of Mary. Lutheran ears are attuned to hear the proclamation of the Law and the Gospel everywhere, especially in Holy Scripture, but also in the thousand-voice chants of street protests. In every context of life we listen for the one word of God that speaks into human life in ways that feel like a punch or like a promise, depending on where we stand.

How do we expect the proud and powerful to hear the protest chant of Mary? Listen to these words as people of privilege might:

Scatter the proud!	Lift up the lowly!
Scatter the proud!	Lift up the lowly!

For them it is the Law, the Word of God that sets boundaries in order to create healthy communities and exposes when those boundaries have been crossed.

The proud and powerful hear a word of challenge here, a punch: “Look out! You are being thrown down from your position of privilege!”

And how do the lowly and hungry hear these same words? Listen to how these words sound from the margins of society:

Scatter the proud!	Lift up the lowly!
Scatter the proud!	Lift up the lowly!

Now the very same chant is the Gospel, the Word of God that rescues and redeems, that restores to abundant life. The lowly hear a word of promise, encouragement: “Take heart! You are being raised up to freedom, to live the abundant life God intends for you!”

That’s how my ears hear the song of Mary today, in the context of street protests taking place all across our nation and around the world. I hear her song coming through a bull horn and I hear the response of a thousand people engaged in public advocacy to scatter the proud and lift up the lowly.

But not every time and place is a time like this. Streets filled with crowds of people calling for change are moments in history that come and go. In the long times in between lies a very different context, a very different pattern of life, in which another kind of song is sung. In the long in-between times, when people are alone in their homes and not gathered in crowds in the streets, mothers sing to their small children lullabies of hope.

That’s another way to hear the song of Mary – as the night-time song that Mary sang to Jesus when he was very young, long before he began his public ministry. Songs sung to us at bedtime shape our hearts and minds. They form our souls within us. I can still recall the songs my parents sang to me at bedtime, and in retrospect I can see how profoundly the phrases of those lullabies and bedtime prayers framed who I have been throughout my life.

I suspect that Mary often sang to her little child Jesus the same words she first sang on the doorstep of Elizabeth’s house, or words like them: “My soul

magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my savior, who has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Every generation will call me blessed.”

Hearing the Magnificat as a lullaby takes nothing away from its power to turn the world. We ought never to underestimate the seeds of hope that are planted by the bedtime songs of mothers in the hearts of their children in the in-between times, during those times when the world’s longing for change is being forcibly held down by the proud and the powerful.

We have only to look at the witness of our Lord Jesus to see that this is true. The Scripture narrative bears this out. We hear the song of Mary being sung yet again when we read about the life of Jesus, who lifted up the lowly, who filled the hungry with good things, who sent the rich away empty, and who scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

The Church confesses that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Word of God. That’s why his one way of living came across to people as both a punch and a promise, as both a challenge and as liberation. Jesus’ pattern of self-giving calls into question every instance of self-centeredness. And Jesus’ pattern of self-giving breathes life and hope into everyone being pressed down.

This is what the Church means when it declares that Jesus saves the world. Jesus gave himself away under the crushing weight of the proud and powerful on their thrones until he breathed his last and died. But then, returning good for evil, loving even his enemies, bringing life out of death itself, Jesus toppled injustice of every kind by rooting out its deepest foundation – the fear of death.

Jesus lives! Jesus loves! Jesus welcomes! The Church, at its best, tells this story with all the bold courage of a street protest, and with all the steady perseverance of a mother singing seeds of hope into the hearts of her children, as Mary sang to him.

Mary has long been a symbol for the faith of the Church. An icon of the Church, we might say. The Church has found that it can look to Mary to recalibrate its mission. With Mary, the Church delivers Christ to the world as

she first did in Bethlehem. With Mary, the Church bears witness to Jesus' death and resurrection as she did by standing at the cross and at the empty tomb. With Mary, the Church takes the frightened children of every time and place into her lap and sings to them the song of hope.

Hush, little children, don't you cry.  
I'll teach you how to magnify  
The Lord who unseats the highest of kings  
And fills the hungry with all good things.

With Mary, let us magnify the Lord!

Amen.