

*Scripture: The Songs of Hannah and Mary*  
*1 Sam. 1:9-20, 2:1-8*  
*Luke 1:26-31, 37-38, 46-55*

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Never Sell Yourself Short

Never sell yourselves short. God plans to change the world through the forgotten. Through those cast aside as the least, the greatest good will be done.

That's the good news from Luke that breaks in upon us today, this snowy Sunday morning, as Christmas nears. Never sell yourselves short. With God, all things can be.

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Amy read to us of Hannah, from the Old Testament. Hannah wanted to have a child, but couldn't. The worth of women at that time was measured almost entirely by whether they could produce children, so Hannah felt worthless, barren – the word we apply to a farm field that does not yield crops, to a landscape swept with dust on a distant planet. Barren, empty, desolate.

Though one family member tried to support her, Hannah's home was mainly a place of torment. A second wife, who did have children, was Hannah's "rival," the Bible says, and this rival "used to provoke [Hannah] severely, to irritate her," jeering at Hannah because she could not conceive. So when Hannah had to go each year with the rest of the family up to the Temple, Hannah would not eat anything, and wept.

Worst, when Hannah poured out her heart in prayer at the Temple, imploring God for help, the priest named Eli also sneered; seeing Hannah wordlessly mumbling her prayers and sobbing, Eli accused her of being drunk.

The story of Hannah has always been powerful to me: it can strike a reverberating chord in our lives, and we shake inside. *We know* about life being that unfair: When you ache to be filled. When you face daily taunts, even within your own home. When no one understands, even at your church. When you are falsely accused.

And then new life *does* come. A boy named Samuel is born to Hannah, a boy who grows to be a great servant of God, who reforms the abuses in the Temple perpetrated by the inherited priests, sons of Eli. New birth comes not just to Hannah, but to the temple, also. And in time, it is Hannah's unexpected son Samuel, born to an unlikely mother, who chooses David to be Israel's King –

David himself, who was the youngest and least likely of Jesse's sons, the little shepherd boy from whom no one imagined greatness.

Oh the great reversals of God! Never sell yourselves short. With God, all things can be.

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The same theme rings from Mary's song of praise for God, "the Magnificat," that we sang this morning, that David Wheeler read for us from the Gospel of Luke, that the choir gifted to us in its anthem. In the stunning Magnificat, Mary sings of God's glory, and we hear echoes of Hannah's song. Did you notice the parallels?

From both Mary and Hannah we hear their amazement at what God has done, the great reversals that have taken place. Not only has the barren Hannah now borne a child, but the Messiah will be birthed by the peasant woman Mary, not a Queen. Hannah and Mary say that huge transformations have taken place, completely unexpected changes: the proud and rich and powerful have been brought low, and the lowly, the hungry and the poor are raised up, by God's hand. Servants are the winners.

God enters the world by overturning everything we've come to expect; through making up down, and down up, by giving hope to those who by all rights should be completely hopeless.

Never sell yourselves short. With God all things can be.

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In the last few weeks, we've been exploring the differences between Matthew and Luke's versions of how Jesus was born. Which is right? Is either?

Using this book by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan ([The First Christmas](#)), I've been suggesting that Matthew and Luke begin their books about Jesus' life with "prologues," something like the overture to a symphony.<sup>1</sup> Just as in an overture to a symphony, the composer sets up the themes that will be developed in subsequent movements, so Luke and Matthew both begin their books about Jesus with a story about how he was born that sets forth the core themes they will develop further.

The birth stories are like parables, Borg and Crossen suggest: teaching tools to help us better understand Jesus and God.

For Luke, the poor and forgotten are precious to God, vitally important.<sup>2</sup> So in Luke's birth story, where God's commitment to the poor is central, Jesus is born in a barn, rather than an inn; in Luke, the very first people to hear of the

birth are shepherds, those on the lowest rung of society, rough laborers who live outside with animals. These low wage workers hear the glorious news while they are on the job, right in the midst of their menial tasks. Think of a busboy, taking out the trash, being stopped by an angel.

And in Luke, probably most telling of all, Mary sings her Magnificat, praising God for astonishing reversals, the triumph of the poorest, the hungry, the lowly. She cannot stay silent – she is astonished, amazed! Hopes that seemed utterly impossible come to be.

Never sell yourselves short. With God all things can be.

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What of the birth story in Luke is factually true? Historians know Jesus was a real human, as were Mary and Joseph.<sup>3</sup>

But as for Mary's Magnificat, we can never know if Mary actually composed it, spontaneously bursting into song, as Luke suggests, when she saw her cousin Elizabeth. What is most likely is that Luke took a real hymn, already being sung in the early Christian church,<sup>4</sup> and placed it onto Mary's lips when he crafted the birth story in about the year 100.

In fact, it seems Luke inserted *three* early Christian hymns into his narrative: he has Mary sing the Magnificat; Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, sings The Benedictus; and Simeon, an old man who has been waiting all his life for the Messiah, sings the Nunc Dimittis.

All three of these are canticles we still sing here at King's Chapel, in Morning and Evening Prayer, and they're found in the first two chapters of Luke.

What also could be true, according to the late Professor Raymond Brown of Union Seminary in New York,<sup>5</sup> is that the Magnificat was the hymn of a particular group of early Christians who lived in Jerusalem, known as the Anawim, meaning the Poor Ones.

These Poor Ones were those financially poor, but the term was more encompassing: it also included the "downtrodden," the sick, the suffering, the worn down and weary, a group who had learned they could "not trust in their own strength alone," but could rely on God.

Therefore, despite their poverty, they didn't sell themselves short. These first Christians didn't despair. They shared what they had among one another, and for strength, prayed together often at the Temple, praising God with the Magnificat: the unexpected is possible! The lowly are valued! God finds ways to work through us!

Mary, like Hannah before her, sings thanks to God that God has looked upon “the low estate of your handmaiden.” While now we tend to see this phrase poetically – “Mary the lovely handmaiden of the Lord” - the word we translate as handmaiden is the feminine form of slave.<sup>6</sup> *No one* reading Luke would want to be a real slave, so including the Magnificat right at the beginning of his Gospel would have confirmed readers' worries, that the early Christians were a bizarre lot, a group of slaves, worshipping a criminal. In fact, said Professor Brown, ‘When the Roman governor Pliny in the early second century went looking for Christians to find out what this strange group was, he turned to slavewomen because among such lowly creatures he was likely to find Christians’.

Luke's prominent placement of the Magnificat, front and center in his story, spoke volumes.

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People always are reluctant to associate with the lowly, the slaves, those without power. And saying that we need God means admitting our weakness, our need for transformation. To admit being lowly means everything is not all right. When someone asks us how we are, it means having the courage to say, “Not so well.”

It's acknowledging that we haven't been as successful as we once dreamed, in business or marriage or parenting. It's looking headlong into tragedies that are nearly beyond bearing – children suffering, illness striking the innocent, abuse of the vulnerable – and in the face of all this, confessing that we need help from beyond ourselves.

To be weak is to be vulnerable. To seek transformation means there's a hole right through our hearts; wounds still open under our smiles; mistakes still needing forgiveness.

The Church as a gathering of the “poor ones”? Ones who need God, the God for whom nothing is impossible?

Wouldn't we rather just say we can handle it all on our own?

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Last week, I loved being at Milk Punch Sunday, my first time with you for this annual tradition. It was the best of who we are as church: a community enjoying one another, where we could greet those we've not seen in a while, where many were known and felt accepted, where excellent homemade food was shared, familiar carols sung, and old games played.

Children from 4 to 40 or 400 (we felt) played musical chairs and gyrated to the Twelve Days of Christmas, flapping our wings as we pantomimed the “three French hens, two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree.” It was all warmly familiar to those gathered, and we rejoiced in our splendid traditions. Church, at its best, always represents this marvelous familiarity and tradition – a place where we are known, and *can* be vulnerable.

Church also represents the utterly unexpected reversals proclaimed in the Magnificat, where what we once thought gets turned completely upside down. Church is the place where we feel safest to be open– Hannah praying in her pain - but also a place of challenge, where we squirm hearing Luke’s uncomfortable messages about the fall of those with power, prestige and possession.

Church is where old, old canticles are sung again, from the earliest of times until today, and a place of new births to the least likely of people. Church is a place of astonishing changes where the watchword is servant, not throne.

So as church, we servants are challenged to ask, How can we best serve God? In this city, at this time, among these poor ones, God’s beloveds? Who does God dream for us to be, in the midst of a world that declares weakness to be avoided at all costs, where being a child of Newtown, Connecticut means to be vulnerable, and the world’s answer in the last year has been to arm more people with more guns to be strong!

Into this world, the whisper of God to the most unlikely of us, is this: Nothing is impossible with God. Because Love is more powerful than fear. God is love. Fear not.

Never sell yourselves short, says God. For with God all things can be.

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Parents bereaved in Newtown think this is possible. Their request, this weekend, on the first anniversary of the unspeakable loss of little children, is not for our anger and vengeance, not for our power and might. It’s for our kindness. A little more kindness from us all, to each other. They trust that the smallest gestures – like the smallest infant in a stable – can grow into things larger, and change us, change our world.

Yesterday I heard a radio broadcast about this hope, from two young people who had more right to speak of it than I.<sup>7</sup> One is himself a victim and survivor of the Virginia Tech massacre, and another is sister to a boy killed in the Aurora, Colorado theater shooting. They were asked their opinion about the request made by Newtown parents, for kindness from many, many nameless, faceless

people, the country over. Was it only wishful thinking that that could change the world?

No, it wasn't wishful thinking, these two young people said. Kindness does matter. It makes a huge difference.

The young man explained that on the first anniversary of Virginia Tech, some students chose as their memorial to practice "actively caring for people." Small rubber bracelets with the words "Actively caring for people" were given out, and when the wearers saw someone actively caring for another, they took the bracelet from their own wrist, and passed it on, asking the recipient to pass it along also, when they saw kindness. Colin, who'd been shot at Virginia Tech, passed his own rubber bracelet on to someone he saw offering his seat on the bus to an elder.

Now several years later Colin still sees the bands on wrists, new wrists now, travelling across their whole community, and probably beyond, spreading kindness and caring.

The sister of a boy killed in the Aurora movie theater, said it's much easier to hold anger and hate close to your heart. It's not easy to offer kindness to another person, but love and kindness and community win out above everything else. Compassion for others lets you move further.

What a reversal! Where there could so easily be hatred, practices of kindness grow. Can grow, in your life, too. In the life of this church. Even in our world.

For God, nothing is impossible. Against all odds, the hope of the poor shall not be taken away. The God who cherishes all of us, can use even the least likely of us, to bring fairness and love to this world.

And we – you and I and King's Chapel – *will* have some part in that whole story, if we never sell ourselves short. Because with God, all things can be.

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Benediction:

May God grant you the grace  
    never to sell yourself short.  
Grace to risk something big  
    for the sake of something good.  
Grace to remember  
    that the world is now too dangerous  
        for anything but truth  
    and too small  
        for anything but love.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth (Harper One, 2007). Throughout Advent, I am using this book to guide my series of sermons. For the birth narratives as parables or overtures, see pp. 38-39.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Borg and Crossan at 48.

<sup>3</sup> Id. at 38

<sup>4</sup> Raymond E. Brown, Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year (Liturgical Press, 2008), pp. 78-81.

<sup>5</sup> Id.

<sup>6</sup> Id. at pp. 92-95.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.thetakeaway.org/story/seeking-gift-kindness-wake-sandy-hook/>

<sup>8</sup> This benediction is used at the University UCC in Seattle; it is adapted from William Sloan Coffin.