



Pressezentrum

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First I want to thank all those responsible for the invitation to speak today. It is an honor to be here and I am honored by your presence. I was especially pleased to be asked to reflect on this text which is the gospel reading I chose for my ordination 34 years ago. I've been reflecting on this story ever since and there are always new details to notice. In all these years, there's one detail that I never gave much thought to, until now. Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months.

According to Luke, the very moment that Gabriel leaves Mary, Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She enters what is referred to as Zechariah's home but the focus of this story is all about the women. Mary greets Elizabeth, John the Baptist jumps into some prenatal prophesying, Elizabeth greets Mary with blessing and Mary sings her revolutionary song. At the end of all that Luke tells us: Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months, and then returned to her home.

I've been thinking about those three months. Not one, not two, not four, but THREE months. Why does Luke mention three months? Many imagine that the gospel writer Luke was also a physician and while it's unlikely that Luke served as a midwife, he would certainly be aware that the first three months are the most uncertain in any pregnancy. During that vulnerable time, up to a third of pregnancies end in miscarriage. Many women choose not to announce their pregnancy for three months.

Three months is also the average length of time for pregnant women to experience morning sickness. Schwangerschaftsübelkeit.

The Puerto Rican mothers in my Bronx church called it "malabarriga," which translates as "evil belly," and feels much closer to my experience than the English expression "morning" sickness.

My sickness was never confined to the morning. And with our second child, I could barely eat or function. After some tests, the doctor said that this was caused by a hormone level three times higher than normal. He told me that perhaps I was pregnant with twins or even triplets. A sonogram showed that it was just our lively son, Hans. The doctor happily assured me that my belly was not cursed at all. Just the opposite, the extra high hormone level was a healthy sign of strong new life taking hold. It would just take my body time to adjust to the flood of hormonal changes.

Mary's Magificat comes to us out of these three months of malabarriga. Three months of churning, unsettling change in her body and, we must consider, in the social body she was part of. In addition to physical morning sickness, we can imagine her anxiety and uncertainty, the gossip swirling around her, leaving her vulnerable not only to miscarriage but to the miscarriage of justice. As a young woman she is bound by the laws of matrimony, she is pregnant but not by the one to whom she is betrothed, leaving her open to the threat of community rejection, and possible death.

All of this is taking place in Judea, a Roman colony under the rule of Herod- a narcissistic tyrant known for massive building projects including housing, palaces and an enormous wall. A man whose ego knew no boundaries or controls, who lashed out at those he determined to be against him. A disturbed personality who put the vulnerable in peril. We have someone like that in the White House right now and it's enough to give anyone a bad case of malabarriga.

Just as those three months were a time for Mary's body to adjust to the flood of hormonal changes that are an uncomfortable part of birthing new life, so it is with the church. You will have to decide if this is true in your context, but in the United States, the church is experiencing a flood of changes. It is a time of changing racial demographics that shock the system of white supremacy, both outside AND inside the church. Because the Lutheran Church in the US remains one of the whitest churches, nearly 98% white but the society around us is more and more multicultural.

There are generational changes that impact church attendance and provoke questions around worship style, leadership styles, about what contextually meaningful and authentic mission looks like. There is both fear, despair and avoidance of environmental degradation. Facing all these things along with institutional racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and more can cause churning stomachs and unsettled hearts and minds. Many people get queasy while absorbing Mary's words of some being brought down from positions of privilege while others are lifted up so that a true community can be formed-- because equality with those you feel superior to is sickening to some, because equality with those who are regularly dehumanized and criminalized by the regime in Washington makes many people feel sick. Which is why they voted for a president they hoped would stop the flood of change.

For most of our experience, feeling sick is a sign that something is wrong and we want to do everything possible to feel better again, to get rid of whatever is causing us to feel bad. I know many churches that have been closed and that are about to be closed because they would rather die than change. New ideas, new faces, new ways, new languages, new music. It must all be bad if it makes us feel uncomfortable and unsettled.

This is natural because 9 times out of 10, if you feel so bad, you are sick ... but there are exceptions and morning sickness is one. Instead of being a sign of something going wrong, it's a sign of new life taking shape. A hopeful sign of a new beginning, of new birth. A sign of the ongoing reformation Lutherans claim as core to our identity.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months. These three months with Elizabeth are a liminal space, an in-between time, a transformational time of growing. This time of uncertainty, anxiety and vulnerability is pregnant with the future, with hope, with Christ.

For Luke, three months is always such a special time. When he writes in Acts, Luke tells us that Paul stayed in Ephesus for three months and "spoke boldly" to the people there. Then he stayed three months in Greece.

Paul was in Greece for three months of sanctuary, a safe place in the face of violent plots against him, the way the immigrants in my city seek sanctuary churches to avoid being hunted down and thrown into immigrant detention centers. Later, after the ship that was carrying him to Rome to stand trial was wrecked in a storm, Paul and his captives stayed on the island of Malta for three months. A 3-month time of sanctuary and preparation for next steps. A liminal space, an in-between time, a transformational time.

When Mary and Elizabeth share three months together, I think it's also important to notice that we have two generations together. Both Mary and Elizabeth are bearing life in ways that are completely unexpected, new, against the patterns of the past. Elizabeth was barren. From what we can tell, she was likely more the age of Mary's Oma than Mary's mother. The age of the omas and opas in the pews of many churches today. Churches that others see only as barren. I mentioned that in the United States many churches are closing. They are too small to sustain themselves and there is no money from the government. Elizabeth's generation is aging and dying and their church is not birthing the new children they hoped for. It's easy to think, well the older generation is out of touch, their church is barren. But this story sees things differently.

Mary and Elizabeth carry the future together. The 3 months are not spent in isolation, but in community. The words of Martin Luther King in his "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" continue to ring true. "I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. ... Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." The elder Elizabeth welcomes the young Mary, and in their embrace, they have one garment of destiny wrapped around their shoulders. One garment woven with the strong strands of their ancestral past and the bright strands of future hope. "According to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." In God's mercy, from generation to generation, one generation needs the other.

Of course, we understand that Mary needs Elizabeth. At a time of danger, uncertainty, facing a future she can hardly imagine or understand, the very young Mary seeks out the elder Elizabeth. Perhaps for comfort, or wisdom, solidarity and support at a time when others are against her. Elizabeth's own time of morning sickness is past. She is in her sixth month.

But Elizabeth also needs Mary. After years of barrenness, hope has taken flesh in Elizabeth's aging body and the new life in her body is connected to the new life in Mary's body. In her own belly, Elizabeth feels the gift that Mary comes bearing. For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

And here is something so important for my generation to note-- both women are bearing new life, but the older Elizabeth privileges the younger Mary's pregnancy. Elizabeth prioritizes Mary's need for hospitality and sanctuary and perhaps, most importantly, Elizabeth shows a preferential option for Mary's voice and vision over her own. I want to pattern myself on Elizabeth. She utters a word of blessing and steps aside so that the voice of Mary may sing out. Elizabeth models a way forward for older generations in the church: sometimes we must stand down, sit

down and be quiet, so that the voices and visions of another generation can be heard. So I'm going to pause now for us to sing together, with voices young and less young! (Song with choir)

And now to Mary's song. When Mary opens her mouth, we might expect her to complain. To magnify the injustices around her. The fact that she is not truly seen and valued by her society. But in the midst of anxiety, injustices and uncertainty, Mary magnifies the promise and mercy of God. She refuses to magnify the terror and loss of those living under the cruel institutions of Roman. Mary sings of God's work when much is still at an embryonic stage and the end result is not yet visible. Mary sings of a future too small to see, taking shape in her body, where the hungry are fed, and the decolonizing reversals of power leave everyone on equal footing. Mary lifts up truth in a world that magnifies so many alternative truths. Mary's Magnificat reminds us that every small, fierce voice of truth raised in protest, every embryonic dream, every liberating vision towards which we labor without yet arriving is already more present than it may seem. And it's all magnified in Mary's song, and in Mary's unsettled and unsettling body.

So in addition to teaching us about the blessings of that queasy feeling many experience in the church as part of birthing a new thing, Mary's Magnificat is also a call for embodied God-talk. It matters that the Word is made flesh in the brown body of a poor, young Middle Eastern woman living under Roman occupation. It matters that Mary will soon be fleeing violence and terror on the flight to Egypt like many refugees and immigrants today. Mary's Magnificat calls us see these details of incarnation. It matters that she knows what it is to live in an empire that wants to detain you and deport you. And it matters and she will know the excruciating pain of living in a state that will kill her child and acquit the killers, something that just happened again when the police killer of an unarmed Black man named Terence Crutcher was set free and his family was condemned to a life-sentence of grief and loss.

Our NYC church has a large sign in front saying: BLACK LIVES MATTER. Some say, this is a detail we don't need. They argue that the sign should read: ALL LIVES MATTER. Of course, all lives matter, but in my country, we see every day that all lives do not matter because Black lives do not matter. We see this in our criminal justice system, when time after time after time, white police are acquitted in the murders of black men, women and children. We see it in schools, health care and housing. And so our sign matters. It is a way to say, we see you. Your life does matter.

We have another sign outside that says "INMIGANTES Y REFUGIADOS BIENVENIDOS! "And it has a picture of Mary, Joseph and Jesus on the flight to Egypt. But are not others welcome? Yes, but when our government is busy criminalizing all brown-skinned immigrants, deporting people whose only crime is seeking safety and a better future for their children, then the church needs to say, we see YOU. We welcome YOU. We see you on the border. We see you crossing the desert without water. We see you crossing seas and drowning in the waves. We see your babies washed up on the beach. Left bleeding in the street without timely medical help. Of course, when we truly see, then we must act.

If you walk into the lower level of the church I serve you'll see a mural painted on the wall with three people who represent reformation and liberation. One is Martin Luther, one is Frederick Douglass, the African-American social reformer and abolitionist and one, with her arms around them both, is the Virgin of Guadalupe.

The virgin of Guadalupe is brown skinned, pregnant and appeared in Mexico speaking the language of the indigenous people, not the Spanish of the conquistadores. She appeared away from the capital city on the margins of power, among the poor. She appeared to a poor uneducated campesino named Juan Diego and gave him a message to take to the bishop. Juan Diego was given a word to re-orient the church, to turn the church away from the haunts of power and wealth, towards the margins.

She is the Mary of the Magnificat. She welcomes undocumented immigrants who come to worship in the church I serve, Trinity Lutheran Church. Trinity was built by German immigrants in 1908 with beautiful stained glass windows, but in the windows all the disciples are white. The angels and shepherds are white. The crowds that Jesus teaches and the children Jesus blesses are white. Jesus is white. Joseph is white and of course, Mary is white. This is to be expected for a church built by German immigrants in 1908, but the black and brown children sitting in church today cannot see themselves in those windows. They are invisible. We needed to add the image of a Black Jesus and we needed to add the Virgin of Guadalupe.

She is the Maria who welcomes Latino immigrant children who come to our after school homework help program. She is Maria who welcomes the women of Mujeres en Progreso, led by a longtime Latina member of the congregation. These women meet for support, prayer, workshops and sharing stories, including stories of worker abuse.

Guadalupe, called Lupe for short, was glad when the woman whose groceries she was packing asked if she would come for a day of housework. It was heavy-duty cleaning--washing floors, walls and windows all day--but Lupe only thought of being able to buy the new clothes and shoes her children needed. When ten hours had

passed and it was time to collect her wages, Lupe was handed a ten-dollar bill, told that a stinking Mexican ought to be grateful, and shown the door.

We could listen, we could see, but we could not undo what happened to Lupe. We could and did join with other churches and synagogues in our neighborhood who didn't want to stand silently by while this immigrant worker abuse went on around us and so we joined together to form an ecumenical, interfaith community group that visited business asking them to sign an agreement to support labor laws and we boycott and picket restaurants that function as sweat shops. A few have closed down. A few have improved and done the right thing. A few are trying to sue us.

Because of our activism, a group of immigrant restaurant workers asked if they could meet at the church. They felt seen and safe. And they spoke of miserable \$3 an hour wages at a restaurant a block from the church. \$3 an hour-- even though the minimum wage is \$15 an hour. Adolfo and Julio spoke out. They lost their jobs. They went to court and along with others they won a judgment for \$700,000 in back pay. But here's the problem. They can't collect it. The restaurant changed its name so legally it's a different entity, but in reality, everything is the same. This is happening to immigrants in nail salons, laundromats and to home health care workers. Latino immigrants, Chinese immigrants and African immigrants. People who do essential work but remain invisible in their reality, in their dignity, in their humanity.

Every Friday, when these workers come to meet and organize they are greeted by the brown-skinned Guadalupana who knows what it is to have her native language suspect, ridiculed and silenced.

When we truly see, then we have to act. On Tuesday when I got on plane to come here, members of my church got on a bus with Adolfo and Julio and Lupe and many others to go to our state capital to lobby lawmakers for a bill to close the legal loopholes that allow for this wage theft. Being on that bus is a way of saying we see you. We journey with you. We have heard your song.

It has been important for Christians and Jews in my neighborhood to join to fight for justice together and my eyes have been opened to Christian/Jewish relationships in a new way, because there is another Mary in my life, the Marienkirche in Lübeck where my father was baptized and confirmed. What I didn't know is that my grandparents were Jewish and likely did this for reasons of assimilation.

Six years ago, my daughter Ana called me around midnight and said: "Mom, do you know you're from a prominent Jewish family and your grandfather was murdered in a concentration camp." "Ana, that's not true," I said. "What makes you say that? Where are you getting that from?" Wikipedia? It must be a mistake! But it was true. My father came from a German Jewish family that can be traced by to 1510. He came to New York in 1938 and never spoke of his Jewish heritage. I never knew that my grandparents were deported from a train station here in Berlin and taken to Theresienstadt and my Opa was murdered and my oma was a survivor. To me, she was only my sweet, loving Oma living in an Altenheim in Switzerland.

In my research about this family history, I went to see my father's cousin Renate, 93 years old and living in Lübeck. Renate's father was Jewish, one of my Oma's brothers but her mother was not. Renate said that this made her what the Nazis called a Mischling, the defective products of race defilement. Renate was an exceptional student and expected to go to college and perhaps further, but being labeled a Mischling meant that this was no longer an option.

If my well-educated father had been born a decade later, this would have been his fate as well. Renate said: "It was so hard, no one can understand. To be told every day you have no worth, no intelligence, that you are worse than a worm, to be told over and over. No one can understand how hard it was." Renate had kept silent about these things. It was not easy for her to share her experience with me. But in her old age, she spoke out, like Mary in her youth. She spoke with courage and honesty. She spoke against the alternative facts that would deny her story. Renate spoke her words in reference to my father when she was describing him to me as a "burnt child," but she and my father were both burned by the message of the times.

I am no stranger to "burnt children." My church has a shelter for homeless young adults who have been kicked out by their families because of their sexual orientation or gender identification. These young people have all been scorched by hateful labeling and worse. One night at dinner, when Jose was thirteen, he told his mother that he was gay, and she began stabbing him with her fork while yelling, "This is a Christian home!" He has a row of scar bumps on his arm and another on his side from the fork attack. Jose ran away and survived one way or another until he found his way to our shelter.

The transgender youth have a particularly difficult time finding acceptance. Nineteen-year-old Nicole required reconstructive facial surgery after a beating that left her permanently brain damaged. The rate of attempted suicide among transgender youth is reported as being upward of fifty percent. It is galling to know that in almost every case, these young people have been burnt, not helped, by religion. I never imagined that my own privileged family harbored those who'd been taught it was dangerous to claim their full identity.

Now I wonder if I, a pastor and the executive director of a shelter for queer youth, have been unknowingly seeking to heal the wounds that also seared my heritage? I couldn't hear the voices of my Jewish ancestors crying out from pogroms and Shoah death camps where I lost 16 whose names I know, but perhaps they call to me from the cries I do hear, from generation to generation.

Chrissy, a young transgender woman who grew up in a rejecting, conservative Mormon community came back to the shelter one night and began to play our piano. She played beautifully and when I complemented her on the music, she paused, looked at me and said, "This is the only place I feel human." She feels human because she is seen. And her music was her Magnificat. And today, she uses her voice to council other transgender youth. To give them hope.

Her Magnificat, like Mary's, is a matter of life and death. How we see one another is a matter of life and death. We know that Jews were described as Untermenschen. This language prepares the psychological groundwork that makes it easier to see others as less than human, easier to inflict atrocities upon another human being. In my own country, our own president has used language that implies that refugees and immigrants are Untermenschen. African American young men are labeled as thugs which makes choking them, shooting them and incarcerating them more acceptable.

Sermons in conservative churches don't tell people to go out and kill, but they say homosexuality is wrong, is a sin, is of the devil,"You are less than who God has created you to be. Less than human. Subhuman." This gives sanction to hate and violence even if that is not the intention. So when queer young people are murdered in NYC, most often transgender women of color, I do blame preaching. When young people commit suicide because of rejection and bullying related to sexual orientation or gender identification, I hear the ancient echo: "The voice of your brother's blood, your sister's blood, is crying to me from the ground." And like it or not, its crying from many pulpits. I don't know if that happens here but we've all heard the cries coming out to us from Chechnya.

Sixty years after my grandfather's murder, I was invited to preach at the Marienkirche in Lübeck. Around the time my grandparents sent my father to safety in the United States, Bishop Erwin Balzer arrived at the Marienkirche where he preached hate from the pulpit and said "My theological position is derived from the National Socialist ideology." One of the lectionary texts for the Sunday I preached was from Hebrews, Chapter 13 with the lines: Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

Afterwards a woman came up to me. She told me that her mother had been confirmed there like my father had and then she told me that she had hated her mother for 40 years. My mother was a perpetrator, she said. And then she added, "I've been coming here every Sunday for all these years, and never once, until today, has anyone mentioned anything from the pulpit about those days." For forty years, this woman had been coming to church bearing a toxic mix of hatred, anger, shame, guilt and God knows what else...and that's kind of the point that God does know intimately and lovingly and eternally, but she never heard that. She didn't feel seen. Not once, in 40 years. She felt that her trauma and pain were invisible.

There are beautiful Mary statues around the Marienkirche. But Mary of the Magnificat had been strangely silenced, perhaps not really, but at least in this woman's experience. And her words made me ask myself- "What are the unmentionable topics in other churches? In my church?" Here are what some pastors in the United States wrote on Facebook when I posed that question:

It can be unmentionable to tell an all-white congregation that they are all white. Got me let go once.

White privilege. #Blacklivesmatter

The vulnerability of being an embodied human.

gun control and glorification of the military.

Money, class, sex, death, depression, domestic violence, race, and the isms related to those.

You may have your own list. What do people need to hear out loud in church and from the church in order to know they are seen. That their pain matters. That their voice matters. That their vision matters. What should we magnify? What does the church need to make big, that instead we are belittling, making small?

The task before us can feel overwhelming at times but in these days, I find hope in the courageous song of Mary. I find hope in the connections between Mary and Elizabeth from generation to generation. I find hope in the many people who are resisting evil and magnifying the mercy and justice of God in their words and in their actions. I find hope in those inside the church and outside the church who allow themselves to become uncomfortable and unsettled for the sake of the future they carry. I find hope in you.

I find hope in Christ. I can't help but wonder if Luke's insistence on three months is connected to Luke's testimony concerning the three days. Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again'" And again in Acts, Peter testified at Cornelius' house, God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.

God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.

When Luther wrote about the Magnificat he spoke of this seeing: Every one strives after that which is above him, after honor, power, wealth, knowledge, a life of ease, and whatever is lofty and great. And where such folk are, there are many hangers-on... On the other hand, no one is willing to look into the depths with their poverty, disgrace, squalor, misery and anguish. From these all turn away their eyes. Where there are such folk, every one takes to his heels, forsakes and shuns and leaves them to themselves

"From these, all turn away their eyes" but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. Seen in immigrants and refugees. Seen in oppressed workers and abused women. Seen in homeless youth. And also, beloved, seen in you.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months, and then returned to her home. My hope is that this time of Kirchentag will be something like the time Mary and Elizabeth shared. A liminal space, an in-between time, a transformational time. And then, like Mary, you will return home, seeing anew.

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