

A Sunday Marked Love
Luke 1:39-55
12.23.18
Advent 4C
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St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

Animal Farm by George Orwell was banned in the Stalinist USSR and is still allegedly banned in Cuba and North Korea for its satire of communism and promotion of revolution. Kenya and the UAE have found reasons to ban the book as well for depictions of corruption and a talking pig, respectively.

The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger "has the fascinating double distinction of being both the most banned and the second most taught book in American schools."¹ Salinger's book was thought to incite teenage rebellion, spread communism, and potentially cause murders. Banning the book only guaranteed American teenagers sought it out to read it cover to cover, of course.

Salman Rushdie hid from a fatwa issued by Iran and avoided the Ayatollah's murderous eye, though a Japanese translator of Rushdie's work was murdered for his contribution to spreading *The Satanic Verses*. Bombings and threats surrounded the book's publication. Considered blasphemous for his treatment of The Prophet, his book was also banned in India, Bangladesh, the Sudan, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Thailand, Tanzania, Singapore, and Venezuela.

Removed from libraries, burned in public squares, ripped from schools. We know of dozens of books famously banned for their contents. Either characters are wildly rebellious without remorse or the author's champion ideologies that threaten the power structures of civilizations. Whatever the reason, we tend to scoff at this practice of banning books as outdated, ill-conceived, and ineffective.

Does it surprise you to know that Mary's *Magnificat* has been banned as well?

¹ <https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/articles/the-12-most-famous-banned-books-of-all-time/>

*'My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
For the Mighty One has done great things for me.*

Sounds good so far. Something like a psalm, right? Praise for God's grace and blessing. We hear the musicality in it. If we're being very clever, we hear the parallels to Hannah's song in I Samuel as she delights in bearing another miraculously conceived son. And like Hannah, Mary takes a turn and begins to name what God will do in this world as though it has already been done.

*He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
But has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
But has sent the rich away empty.*

And therein lies the controversy. Turns out rulers like their thrones quite a lot, and the rich don't desire to be sent away empty. Oppressors fear the idea of the oppressed rising up; particularly with Divine assistance. It is fitting and right that "people on the margins [of society] have identified with this powerful poem [throughout history] and been inspired to believe that God can actually bring liberation to their plight. In fact, in the past century at least three different countries have banned the public recitation of Mary's *Magnificat*. These governments considered the song's message to be dangerously subversive." Ah, how I love when our sacred texts are dangerously subversive!

"During the British rule of India, the *Magnificat* was prohibited from being sung in church. In the 1980s, Guatemala's government discovered Mary's words about God's preferential love for the poor to be too dangerous and revolutionary. The song had been creating quite the stirring amongst Guatemala's impoverished masses. Mary's words were inspiring the Guatemalan poor to believe that change was indeed possible. Thus their government banned any public recitation of Mary's words. Similarly, after the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo—whose children all

disappeared during the Dirty War [of the 1970s and 80s]—placed the *Magnificat's* words on posters throughout the capital plaza, the military junta of Argentina outlawed any public display of Mary's song."²

Friends, do you hear this? The words of Mary. Outlawed. Because she incited rebellion and revolution all the way into the 20th century!

Imagine taking the words of scripture so seriously. Imagine dropping our cynicism and skepticism as we approach ancient texts and approaching them, instead, expecting a word from God. Imagine believing that word from God is a revolutionary call to change the world as we know it. What would happen if we took Mary's words so seriously that we imagined a world made over just as she did? What if we cried out against corruption and oppression because the Love of God compelled us and the word of God rang so true in our hearts? What if the call to revolutionary love threatened the powers and principalities of our nation as we presently know it?

Lest you call me anachronistic and suggest I am laying my own 21st century, theologically progressive political agenda on top of Mary's 1st century song of praise, consider these observations on the political context of the Magnificat from Catholic writer Elizabeth Johnson. She notes Mary's song is "Rooted in the biblical heritage of Palestinian Jewish society, [the Magnificat] is clearly a revolutionary song of salvation whose concrete social, economic, and political dimensions cannot be blunted. People are hungry because of triple taxes being exacted for Rome, the local government, and the temple. The lowly are being crushed because of the mighty on their thrones in Rome and their deputies in the provinces. Now, with the nearness of the messianic age, a new social order of justice is at hand. Mary's canticle praises God for the kind of salvation that involves concrete transformations."³

One of the more famous stories of the 20th century of a faith leader taking seriously the transformative and concrete calls of scripture was that of Dietrich

² <http://enemylove.com/subversive-magnificat-mary-expected-messiah-to-be-like/>

³ <https://www.uscatholic.org/2011/01/mary-mary-quite-contrary>

Bonhoeffer. Preaching in Advent 1933, 85 years ago this month, as Hitler had officially become Chancellor of Germany, Bonhoeffer pointed to the power of the Magnificat saying, "The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings....This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind."

What an opportunity to make over Mary from the sweet teenager in a pale, blue headscarf to a bold revolutionary who knew she had a starring role in God's radical reordering of the world! She spoke God's capacity for radical change into being and celebrated God's peace and justice as though the world had already been made right. Mothers standing against a violent and oppressive government have chanted her words. A German pastor who ultimately faced his own death in one of Hitler's concentration camps held to Mary's words as revolutionary as he stood up to resist the darkest political force of the 20th century. Banned and forbidden, the hymn has continued to exist beyond the grasp of rulers on their thrones, and Mother Mary calls to us today to read ourselves into the radical, revolutionary story of God.

"Thus, in the words of Rev. Carolyn Sharp, 'Don't envision Mary as the radiant woman peacefully composing the Magnificat.' Instead see her as 'a girl who sings defiantly to her God through her tears, fists clenched against an unknown future.' When we do this, Rev. Sharp goes on to say, 'Mary's courageous song of praise [becomes] a radical resource for those seeking to honor the holy amid the suffering and conflicts of real life.'"

Can you hear this call in your own life? In the public places of systemic oppression and the shadowy nooks and crannies of your heart where private suffering dwells. In the overt injustices of our system of mass incarceration, in our abusive response to a growing, global, forced migration crisis, in the poverty and inequity of our own city. In the violence of your own imagination. In the trauma you have endured. In the fear and grief you silently carry in this very moment. Mary's words call us to believe another way is possible. Not only will God topple the powerful from their thrones, God will remember you because God is merciful.

Our Advent waiting is almost done, my friends, but beware the coming of the Christ. This is no sweet and gentle baby to snuggle briefly and then leave swaddled in the manger. Everything has changed, and the birth of the Christ-child is but one, visible reminder that God is not done creating and re-creating in this old world. Karoline Lewis reminds us, "the birth of Jesus, every single year, upends the world as we know it, especially when the world needs it the most and specifically when the world persists in pretending that the status quo can continue, business as usual."⁴

Our waiting culminates in this final Sunday of Advent marked for Love. Beware the consequences of the Love of God! Banned, marked as dangerous, outlawed, forbidden. The Love of God lived out in the people who take seriously the calls of scripture threaten the powers of this world and the order of old social structures. The Love of God lived out by people of faith might just bring rulers down from their thrones and lift up the humble. The Love of God lived out by people who take it seriously will fill the hungry with good things and send the corrupt wealthy away empty. This is the Way of the one for whom we wait. Are we ready for the birth of this radical, revolutionary Love into our lives? Are we willing to respond like Mary, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior?" We'll know soon. Our waiting is almost over.

⁴ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5267>