

## Rescue for the Fallen

### Three meditations coinciding with *The Magnificat*, offered by the Choirs and Orchestra of Vienna Presbyterian Church

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**Sermon Series: The Difference Jesus Makes**

Luke 1:46-55

***If it is true that Catholics venerate Mary, Protestants largely ignore her!***

#### ***First Meditation:***

*“Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name’” (Luke 1:46-49).*

John Knox, one of the leaders of the Reformation in Scotland, writes about the early days of the Protestant movement in his book *History of the Reformation in Scotland*. Knox describes being arrested for his Protestant convictions, taken prisoner and forced to row in a French galley ship for 19 months. When the ship he was rowing docked at a port city, a picture of the glorious painted Lady (the Virgin Mary) was brought on board to be revered and kissed. When the picture was passed to one of the chained Scottish rowers, who was believed to be none other than John Knox himself, he said, “Trouble me not, such an idol is a curse and I will not touch it.” The two officers in charge insisted he take the icon and forcefully thrust the picture image into his lap. Knox took the picture in his hands, cast it into the sea and exclaimed,

“Let our Lady save herself: she is light enough; let her learn to swim.”

Such were the good ole’ days in Protestant-Catholic relations! As I contemplated this story, it occurred to me that Protestants have been throwing Mary overboard ever since! If it is true that Catholics venerate Mary, Protestants largely ignore her!

Catholics and Protestants alike affirm the virgin birth of Jesus. Catholics take it a step further and advocate for Mary’s perpetual virginity. According to Catholic tradition, Mary remained a virgin throughout her life. Jesus’ siblings mentioned in the gospels are interpreted by Catholics to be Jesus’ cousins.

Any doubt about Mary’s exalted status was put to rest in 1854, when Pope Pius IX articulated the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Pope Pius raised Mary beyond our mortal ranks by insisting that, from the moment of her conception, Mary was free from the stain of original sin.

Another Pope Pius, the XII, established in 1950 the Doctrine of the Assumption of Mary, that Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven, in much the same manner as Elijah the prophet.

Protestants recoil whenever Catholics pray to Mary. Now, to be

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fair, Catholics are not taught to pray to Mary, they are advised to pray through Mary. It is the Catholic version of the “communion of the saints.” What’s wrong with asking other Christians to pray for us, even if they are in heaven? And what better intercessor to pray for us than the greatest saint who ever lived—Saint Mary!

It’s not my purpose today to bash Catholics. Quite the contrary, I have healthy admiration for Catholic believers. I myself am the product of a Catholic father and a Protestant mother.

We Protestants need to give Mary her Biblical due. She is a remarkable woman of faith. When the angel Gabriel came to this young unsuspecting teenager to announce she will give birth to the Messiah, she responded, “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1.38). What an act of incredible surrender.

*For he who is mighty hath magnified me: and holy is his Name. Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are filled with your glory. Hosanna in the highest.*

***Second Meditation:***

*“His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has*

*helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendents forever” (Luke 1:50-55).*

The phrase “Hail Mary” has two dictionary definitions. The first definition is a greeting Elizabeth bestows upon her cousin Mary (Luke 1:42; cf. 1:28). Hail Mary is also known by its Latin equivalent Ave Maria.

The second definition of “Hail Mary” is a long pass thrown near the end of a football game. When a team desperately needs a score, the quarterback will heave a “Hail Mary” pass into the end zone in hopes that any receiver in the vicinity will catch it. In our increasingly secular culture, this latter definition is the one people know best.

I haven’t afforded Mary much respect over the years. She is a delicate figurine in my crèche set. I imagine her to be a shy child-bride. In almost every picture I have ever seen of Mary, her eyes are cast down and her hands are folded for prayer, looking somber and super pious.

When I reread *The Magnificat* recently in preparation for this Sunday, something occurred to me. Mary is one gutsy, courageous woman. Think about it! This poor, unwed, pregnant teenager has the audacity to sing about God bringing down the high and mighty and exalting the poor and meek. Anyone within earshot of her singing knew these words were meant for King Herod. When she sang that God

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would send the rich away empty-handed, she was pointing a finger at Herod's insatiable appetite for fame and fortune. Herod executed members of his own family because he regarded them as rivals to his throne.

Not only that, but Mary speaks of this social upheaval as an accomplished fact. In the Greek version of these verses, the verbs appear in aorist tense. Aorist normally expresses past tense. In other words, Mary is expressing confidence in something that has not yet happened. She declares God has already taken decisive action in the promised sending of Jesus Christ in favor of the powerless over the powerful. No one knows it yet, but the poor and oppressed will prevail. So much for Mary meek and mild!

*He hath shewed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek.*

***Third Meditation:***

All the focus on Mary as the mother of Jesus can obscure another valuable lesson. Mary is also regarded as one of Jesus' most committed disciples. Catholics make a compelling argument in favor of Mary as "the first Christian." She is, in every sense of the word, one of Jesus' first disciples.

I invite you to walk through Luke's gospel with me.

When the angel Gabriel announces Mary will give birth to the Messiah, she doesn't whine or protest. She willingly submits, "Let it be to me according to your word" (1:38).

When the shepherds are guided by the star over the manger, they tell of a theophany of heavenly hosts who sing, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (2:14). Luke singles out Mary as the one who "treasures these things and ponders them in her heart" (2:19).

When Mary sings *The Magnificat*, it is almost as if she composes these words with a Bible open on her lap, given her repeated references to the sacred book of the Psalms.

In the only story that survives Jesus' childhood, when Jesus stays behind during Passover to learn the Torah, his parents travel two days out of their way to retrieve him. Mary is the one who gives voice to every parent's lament, "Why have you treated us this way?" (2:48).

When Mary and her sons pay Jesus an unannounced visit, Jesus reacts to the news that his family is outside to visit him with the altogether surprising response: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (8:21).

When Jesus is arrested, tried and executed, the crowds disband and his disciples flee the scene. Even his hand-picked Apostles fall away. Most notable is Judas' betrayal and Peter who, on three consecutive

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occasions denies any association with Jesus. Only one disciple goes all the way to the cross with Jesus: Mary. Peter, James and John are nowhere to be found. Mary alone remains at Jesus' side.

We talk a great deal in this church about discipleship. We are a church committed to disciple-making. We have pledged ourselves to become disciples and make disciples. We are learning all our lives what it means to follow Jesus.

Disciples like Mary point the way. Mary serves as the quintessential disciple, one who goes all the way with Jesus.

“Glory be to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Mary is able to entrust all things, now and always, to the care and mercy of Almighty God. Truly, it is so, Lord. Amen.

*Glory to Father Son and Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, both now and always, and forever. Truly.*