

for he has looked with favour on his lowly servant

So—what does it mean to be a “lowly servant?” It’s something Mary calls herself in the first line of her song, the Magnificat, as she says: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour; for he has looked with favour on his *lowly servant*.” What does it mean to be a “lowly servant,” or more specifically, what does it mean for Mary, here, to call herself a “lowly servant?”

Does it mean being a wallflower? Does it mean simply doing as you’re told? Does it mean just keeping quiet? Not quite, as it turns out.

I had the chance yesterday to search through some images of Mary at the birth of Jesus for our family “Come to the Table” Christmas service. They were largely as you’d expect. Mary, in much of Christian iconography, is something of a contemplative, in wrapt attention, kindly gazing at Jesus the newborn.

And this makes sense, in its own way. Mary *is* a thoughtful, even contemplative figure in Scripture. In the gospel reading today, we hear that when the angel Gabriel speaks to her, Mary is “much perplexed by his words and *pondered* what sort of greeting this might be.” And a bit more famously, when Mary hears all that the angels had told the shepherds, she “treasured all these words and *pondered* them in her heart.” So Mary is, very much, a thoughtful, even contemplative figure in Scripture.

And as we read the gospels, especially Luke, there’s another thing we learn about Mary: Mary is receptive to God’s strange call. When first she says to Gabriel, “how in the world am I to bear this child,” in the end she says “alright. So be it.” “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

And so these two things help us understand what it might mean for Mary to call herself a “lowly servant.” She’s receptive to God’s strange plan for her life, and she’s thoughtful and contemplative about her place in God’s salvation of his people.

But there’s also something ... well, for lack of a better word, there’s something *badass* about Mary in the Magnificat. And not just because of the way she so forcefully explains God’s alarmingly radical politics to us,

2 Sam. 7:1-11, 16; Cant. 18 (Luke 1:47-55); Rom. 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

as though she were reading to us the riot act. It's also because there's something Mary knows, and in striking contrast to her son, and she's just gonna say it and claim it.

There are a whole lot of claims that are made about, and for, Mary's son Jesus. Mary does it herself. Elizabeth has just called Mary "the mother of my Lord," and said that Mary is blessed because she believed what was spoken to her about Jesus being the Son of God. And this is when Mary begins to sing her song, saying that in her pregnancy, in her carrying of the one called by Gabriel the Son of God, that God "has helped his servant Israel ... according to the promise made" to Israel. She claims great things for her son.

Gabriel does the same thing. Mary's son Jesus would reign forever on David's throne, says Gabriel: "He will be great," says Gabriel, "and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Christians would later read such passages as we find in Samuel, and find Jesus there too, and make the same claim again about Jesus. As Christians looked back and read God's promise to King David, the promise that David's "house and ... kingdom [would] be made sure forever ... [and that David's] throne [would] be established forever," Christians would hear this as a claim about Jesus, the one in whom David's kingship is made eternal.

But Jesus himself will be reluctant to call himself such a thing. Jesus is rarely, in the gospels, one to claim his role outright. Gabriel and Mary might have said the quiet parts loud, but Jesus does the opposite, perhaps because he knew that the Messiah would be far more than we could imagine—that it would take a crucifixion, a resurrection, and an ascension for us to know the fulness of his eternal kingship.

So this is *not* a case of like mother, like son. Where Jesus is reticent to speak clearly of his eternal vocation, Mary just outright names her part in God's salvation of the world: "From this day *all* generations will call *me* blessed," says Mary.

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And this is the fruit of all that thoughtful, contemplative rumination, the fruit of all her receptivity to God's way for her and the world. She knows it, she's gonna say it, and she's gonna claim it.

She just tells us of *her* significance. "You think I'm some forgettable girl? Just another teenage mother? You know what?" "*All* generations are gonna call *me* blessed. For the Almighty has done great things, for *me*. Holy is *his* name."

But she doesn't stop there; this "lowly servant" is gonna read us the riot act.

"And this Almighty that has done great things for me? **Fear him**. And he will have mercy on you.

And if you're full of yourself? He will end you."

Are ya mighty up there on your throne? Not for long. He's about to *pull you down*. Because he's not on *your* side. He's on the side of the one about to get ripped off at the Money Mart."

Is your belly full? Then prepare to be *emptied* of all you have. Because all that you had is going to the person you just passed on the sidewalk."

So, what does Mary show us about what it means to be a "lowly servant"? It means listening closely, and thinking deeply about your part in God's salvation of the world in Christ. It means being open about what God has in store for you, and what God has in store for the world.

But can you do that, *and* say the quiet parts loud, *and* lay claim to your place, *and* read the riot act? Can you be a lowly servant, *and* inspire fear, awe, and respect?

Apparently so. Mary did. And we *still* call her blessed.

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