

El Cántico de María

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This text is not only well known in the Latino faith communities but also has great significance for them. The Magnificat (*El Cántico de María*) is a soft canticle, very feminine, which contains the deep emotions that a human being feels when she discovers a “divine” surprise. These “divine surprises” are those unique moments in which there is a coming together of the human and the divine; an intersection of the finite and the infinite. And it is at that moment when we are invited to join God as partners in the historical drama that encompasses human existence. I have chosen this text because it helps us to reflect upon the great and important task which faces those women and men who aspire to be historians of those moments of divine and human intersection where God and humans become partners in mission, the mission of that community called church.

In reading the text I have one major complaint of its author, the use of words in such a precise manner that the author appears to be a careful steward of language. The Magnificat is the culmination of a very intense and complex series of events. When the divine and the human meet in Mary’s womb there is so much I want to be told! There is so much I want described to me! When Mary approaches Elizabeth, once sterile but now pregnant in her middle years, I want details! What did these two women talk about? What words did they use to describe the two life-giving and miraculous events they had experienced? How did they handle their families? How did they deal with the neighborhood gossips? What did Joseph and Zechariah really say to them? I’d like to read this entire narrative in the style of a Gabriel García Márquez, a style that dares not omit a single detail, a style that paints a canvas of events for the reader to gaze upon. But I do understand the dilemma of this Lucan narrative. How does one put into words that unique moment of intersection between the human and divine?

In The Magnificat we read the song of joy and victory that comes at the conclusion of three previous events of great significance: the encounter between Gabriel, God’s messenger, and Zechariah, Elizabeth’s husband; Elizabeth’s pregnancy; and the encounter between Gabriel and Mary. If we read the text carefully the parallels between these events are uncovered:

It is the same divine messenger, Gabriel, who is sent to the elderly Zechariah and to the teenage Mary.

Gabriel tells both Zechariah and Mary that they will have a son and both children are described as “great before God.” They have been chosen from their mothers’ wombs to bring about change in the human story.

Both Zechariah and Mary are told by Gabriel not to be afraid because, as this heavenly messenger well knows, when the divine and the human intersect men and women cannot help but tremble.

But beyond the parallels, there is another important issue found in this text that has everything to do with the reality of being female. In this narrative God has chosen two women to give life and birth to two males who will be very important in the human story of salvation. While the promise is that the two male children to be born will be great, their mothers seem unlikely candidates to any claim to greatness. Elizabeth and

Mary are blood relatives and their situations represent the two opposite poles of the female experience. Elizabeth is sterile and in her middle age while Mary is a young woman, still a virgin. Elizabeth lived in a childless marriage which caused her to live with the cultural shame of her sterility while Mary was engaged and awaiting both marriage and motherhood. Yet despite their apparent life differences these women suddenly find themselves caught in that divine intersection. Elizabeth and Mary unexpectedly find that their bodies now contain a new hope in the new life they each carry. They have been transformed forever. And their transformation has also caused them to face difficult situations.

The text tells us that Elizabeth had been in her home for six months. When Mary goes to visit her she finds the older woman alone, pregnant, yet immeasurably happy. It was also very probable that Mary found that Elizabeth was the main story on the neighborhood grapevine! One can only imagine what was said at the well when people gathered to get water or at the river where the women did their laundry. "She's too old to have a baby!" "What could Zechariah be thinking at his age?" "Yes, and now he's gone mute, won't talk to a soul!" "Why, they're old enough to be grandparents not parents!" But how could Elizabeth explain this divine surprise? Who would believe Zechariah that an angel had actually visited him with news of the pregnancy?

Mary arrives at Elizabeth's doorstep in the midst of all this gossip. What was she thinking? She was still not married and was now pregnant. That was worse than what had happened to Elizabeth. A single mother? Mary knew that soon she too would be the main topic of the neighborhood gossips. Soon she would be the cause of shame and scandal for her family and for Joseph. She knew that more than just a juicy gossip item, her pregnancy also put her very life in peril. Perhaps all these thoughts were running through Mary's mind, which may explain why the text tells us that she "hurried" to Elizabeth's home. Gabriel had already told Mary about her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy. Mary knew all about Elizabeth's long childless marriage and she understood how God had touched her cousin's life by giving her this child. Now as Mary faced her own situation, as she counted the cost and the consequences of her partnership with the divine, she knew she needed an ally, someone who really understood what had happened to her. Mary needed someone who knew by personal experience what it meant to be God's partner, who understood the joys and the wonder, but who also understood the negative consequences of that divine-human alliance. Mary arrives at Elizabeth's home and the child in the older woman's womb moves within her. This unborn child, still in formation, gives the first witness in favor of the One who will come as Savior of the world. The child's movement also served to give both women confirmation that God was in their midst, that they were not alone, that God was a faithful partner.

And it is at this moment in the text that I would like to have those small and intimate details a la García Márquez. What did these two women say to one another? How did Elizabeth react to Mary's pregnancy? What did they say about Zechariah? About Joseph? How did they explain these marvelous events to one another? How did this encounter with the divine contradict their theological presuppositions or simply turn them upside down? What transpired in the three months these women lived together? Did they sit and sew baby clothes? Did Joseph come to visit Mary? Did Zechariah understand what had happened to Mary? These women are important not only to the divine plan as human agents but they are important to the reading

audience. Both Elizabeth and Mary represent what human society underestimates or ignores.

Yet it is precisely because they are on the margins of a society and a culture and God still chooses them as partners that they become powerful players in the human story. It is in the stories of Elizabeth and Mary and in the beautiful song Mary sings that we learn a deep and meaningful lesson about God. Mary and Elizabeth are messengers of a divine message, they are bearers of good news. Their realities contribute to those human details that confirm and reaffirm the fact that God gives value to and uses those whom humans disregard. These two women are witness to the year of jubilee and to the arrival of a new era for humanity.

We also find in The Magnificat clear and direct connections with the histories of other women from the past, Sara, Rachel, Rebecca, Anna. These women, scorned because of their sterility, were chosen by God to be partners in the divine enterprise of salvation. The Magnificat gives voice to while it echoes the history of women whom joined God at unique intersections in the human story. It is a female history. It is a story about pregnancies. It is a woman's story about how God can bring forth life even when all there is death and how God can bring fullness to the human life even when all there is emptiness. This is a woman's song sung in a woman's voice for women of all ages to hear. Yet it has been often silenced or forgotten by those within the faith community who are guilty of a sexism which creates a religious gender exclusivism that denies women their place within the church and within the pages of the story of the church. That is why The Magnificat is an affirmation of what it means to be a woman and a reminder of what women are capable of doing when they dare to enter into God's intersections where the extraordinary has taken place and will continue to take place.

Mary sings and worships God and in her song are heard the voices of all those women who have also loved and obeyed God. Mary's song expresses the emotions of all the women who have partnered with God and in doing so have helped to give shape to the history of that community around the world called church. She sings from the margins. She sings away from the limelight. There is no stage and no audience. She sings with a voice that gives expression to the great power and love of God. Mary sings and her song serves to remind us that where the presence of God is perceived and celebrated, there we will find hope, life, love, and transformation.

And how does Mary's lovely song speak to us today? The Magnificat speaks to us on two levels. On one level it speaks to us in the voice of faith as we gather as members of the community called church. In Mary's song we remember and celebrate with joy God's greatest gift given to us all in a manger. But it also reminds us that the telling of the story of the people of God is in reality a community project. No one can write it alone, in isolation. Nor can it be written about only one people nor to lift up one group over another. The story of God's people begins with the bigger story of God's love for all humanity in all corners of the world. It is a story about women as it is about men. It is your story and my story while it is a universal story. The telling of this story cannot exclude anyone and I lift up the many thousands of Latina Protestants whose hard work and unselfish dedication throughout this century have helped to build our congregations in the United States. Protestant Latinas are a minority within a minority, they truly are on the margins of both the Euro-American society and Protestant denominations and it is for them that Mary has sung.

That is the challenge before us. The story of God's faith community is written as

a witness to the presence of God in the margins. This story is told and is written and is of great value because it confirms and reaffirms that God became human and came to us and today continues to walk with us. As Latina and Latino preachers we tell the story of a people, our people, who despite their economic poverty and their social and political invisibility in the dominant culture, have received a promise from God that there is a place for them at the great banquet table. Our story as Latina and Latino Protestants should remind our youth and children that God has been and is good, that God has been and is faithful, that God has not and will not abandon us and that God can make our tears into joy.

And finally our story as Latina and Latino Protestants serves to remind us that to enter into partnership with God carries a price, there will be risks, we may have to face difficulties. Mary and Elizabeth bore witness to this as they faced the violent deaths of both their sons. Yet the ending of the story is not one of tragedy. The resurrection brought the ultimate victory for Mary and Elizabeth. Their loss and their pain was transformed by the hope for a newness of life that went beyond death itself. That is also the story of the Latino Protestant community in this country. Even when facing apparent loss we live with deep-seated hope in our hearts. Ours is story of victory, of overcoming, of beating the odds. Our story echoes the song of that young woman of yesteryear who faced the scandal of being a single mother to the glory of God! It is my prayer that we can all join in singing,

“Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord,
rejoice, rejoice, my spirit, in God my saviour;”

(Luke 1:46 The New English Bible)