



## We Sing Mary's Song\*

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Martin Luther sent a letter to Prince John Frederick, Duke of Saxony, introducing his commentary on the Magnificat. Luther said that it is a fine custom to sing the Magnificat at Vespers each night. He commended the Magnificat to Prince John Frederick saying that it "ought to be learned and kept in mind by all who would rule well and be helpful lords."

Each time we sing the Magnificat, we proclaim to each other what sort of God we believe in and especially, as Luther says, how God deals with those of low and high degree. Luther says we sing it for three reasons:(1) to strengthen our faith; (2) to comfort the lowly; and (3) to terrify the mighty. We will look at these reasons in reverse order.

*To Terrify the Mighty.* As a group of Lutheran theologians and church leaders, we fit more properly in the category of the mighty than in that of the lowly. Most of us are white, the color of privilege in our hemisphere. We are mostly middle-class, living very comfortable lives and rich by most comparisons. Most of us are male, another privileged group in our hemisphere. As church leaders and teachers, we are highly educated. We are the intellectually elite. We are employed in positions of respect and leadership.

Some of us fit all these categories of the mighty. All of us fit in most of them. Luther said, "The mightier you are, the more you must fear" when you sing the Magnificat. We fear because we *sing in faith*, believing God does bring down the mighty.

It is risky for the mighty to sing the Magnificat. It might mean moving from the center to the fringes. It might mean leaving theologically proper talk to engage in simple, frank discussions. Or it might mean risking tenured positions in our schools of theology, or jobs in the church bureaucracy, as we speak clearly and forthrightly about the implications of our faith. It might mean risking our intellectual credibility as we respect the visions of poor Indians of Guadalupe.

\*A meditation given at the Consultation on Justification and Justice, slightly altered for publication.

But we take the risk! We sing the Magnificat in faith, knowing that fear can lead us to repentance, and repentance prepares us for the coming reign of God.

*To Comfort the Lowly.* We sing to proclaim comfort to the lowly. Each time we sing Mary's song, we are called to believe once again that God has deep regard for the lowly, the hungry, the poor, the little ones.

I was deeply moved by the story of the poor man's vision of the Lady of Guadalupe.<sup>1</sup> I was struck by how lowly, insignificant people have to beg the church to regard them with the esteem with which God regards them. We are not sure whether Mary appeared in a vision to this

poor man. Perhaps we have our Protestant doubts. Yet even if we question the vision, the tragic truth remains: the poor and lowly often have to beg the church to proclaim and live out its message of a merciful, compassionate God! Behind the vision's gilded cactus leaves, miraculous roses, and imprinted cloak is the longing for a God who comes, not in the might of military conquest, nor in the ecclesiastical forms and evangelism plans of a mighty church, but in simple, compassionate respect and regard for the lowly, the hungry, the women, the poor, the children.

We sing the Magnificat to comfort the lowly. We sing to put ourselves in solidarity with the lowly and those who suffer. We sing in order to bring in the reign and community of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*To Strengthen our Faith.* Finally, we sing Mary's song to strengthen our own faith. We keep announcing to one another the sort of God in which we believe: a God who has respect for the Marys of Nazareth, for vulnerable, pregnant, unmarried women; a God who rummages through the dump with the hungry;<sup>2</sup> a God who cries when children are killed and women are raped; a God who sees visions with poor farmers and plants roses on their hillsides.

The successful outcome of this conference will be determined not so much by the confirmation of our theological positions as by the faith of the folks who sit around this table, by the kind of God we believe in as we talk together.

Luther said that Mary sang the Magnificat on the basis of her experience of being enlightened and instructed by the Holy Spirit. We pray that this meeting might be the schoolroom of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>1</sup>In the story of the Lady of Guadalupe, Mary encourages a poor peasant to ask the bishop to build a church for the people. The bishop is finally convinced and grants the request when he sees an imprint of Mary's image inside the peasant's cloak.

<sup>2</sup>The group traveled to the Mexico City dump where they observed poor people searching for food.