

A Room with a View

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, December 19, 2021, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Luke 1:46-55](#)

Copyright © 2021 by Jeffrey S. Spencer

When you think of “a room with a view,” what comes to mind? What images does that phrase evoke? I think of expensive apartments overlooking New York City’s Central Park, or condos perched under the Sutro Tower in San Francisco that look across the city onto the Bay Bridge. I think of hotel rooms on island resorts that look over the ocean or cabins with decks that look across a lake and into the mountains. When I hear someone talking about “a room with a view,” I think about beauty and calm and nature and expense.

I also think about an old joke about the first test tube babies. Psychologists were worried that they would grow up to be quite full of themselves because their conceptions took place in a womb with a view.

As I reflected on the theme for today’s sermon, I realized that every room has a view. Even if there are no windows in that room, the view may be out the door and down the hall. Every room has a view. When I arrived on campus for my freshman year of college, I was directed to my dorm room. It was on the ground floor, and because of the slope of the ground around the building, the bottom of my room’s windows were only a few inches above the grass. I stepped into the room with its cold, cinder block walls, a bunk bed on one side with bare mattresses on it. I looked out the window across maybe 10 feet of grass to the wrought iron fence that encircled the campus, its cold black vertical bars separating the campus from the rest of the city. A room with a view that made me wonder when I could see the warden.

Every room has a view, and I’ve been wondering, what view Mary had from her room growing up. I’ve been wondering what she saw as a child and as a young, betrothed woman. When I listen to her song, I imagine that she saw the socio-economic realities of her world quite clearly. Mary’s view saw a distant elite, an occupying army, and a vast number of people who were barely surviving from day to day.

The song lyrics we heard in today’s reading are from a song Mary sang during a visit with her cousin Elizabeth, who was also pregnant with a child who would become John the Baptist. This song is Mary’s prophecy. This song echoes the song Miriam sang when the Hebrews, escaping slavery in Egypt centuries earlier, crossed the Red Sea.

In a recent interview, theologian John Berquist notes (pun intended), “there’s something about the voice that is singing, that even if you’re not close enough to see the singer, even if you’re not close enough to hear the words, it is still compelling and makes you want to seek out what is happening and to feel with it. And this is a song of such a vulnerability and of such joy that it’s [a] moving experience. And she is singing this with

Jesus in the womb. These melodies of God working among the lowly is what Jesus first learns to dance to.”¹

Berquist isn't the first to suggest that Mary had a profound influence on Jesus, that her worldview was important to the worldview Jesus went on to develop. Paintings from the European Renaissance sometimes depict Mary studying when the Angel Gabriel came to tell her she was going to have a special baby, or sometimes depict a toddler Jesus on her lap as she studies. She must have known her theology to teach it to her child, the artists seem to say. A noteworthy problem with these pictures is that they depict Mary as a member of the elite and as someone who is literate. The historical Mary was almost certainly from the peasant to class and illiterate.

While I think that Mary certainly taught Jesus, I think she taught from the view she had from her room. My understanding of what that means is very much more like the understanding of the Mennonite pastor Isaac Villegas than of the Renaissance painters:

“Jesus must have learned his prophetic ministry from his mother. She was the one who said, ‘The Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty’ (Luke 1:52–53).

“Jesus learned this gospel when he was a child, a baby, as he fussed at his bedtime. He learned his message from Mary, as she held him in her arms, rocking him, whispering her song, comforting him with dreams of a new world—the Magnificat as a lullaby. Mary preached with a song of joy. Political power is about who has a voice, who can speak, who we listen to. And here, at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, the voice we hear is Mary's.

“‘Truly,’ she says with authority, ‘from now on all generations will call me blessed’ (1:48). She knows who she is; she knows what God has done, not just for her but for all of us through her. It will mean a transformation of the world, a structural overhaul of society. The powerful will be brought down from their thrones and the lowly lifted up.

“Mary prophesies a new political arrangement, which will involve the abolition of the old systems of power. This revolution springs from the advent of ‘God's mercy ... from generation to generation’ (1:50). She sings her song ‘in remembrance of God's mercy’ (1:54), which shatters the institutions of injustice that threaten and imprison. Mercy will melt the iron grip of oppressors. Mercy means her liberation and ours.”²

Songs like Mary's can be very powerful teaching tools. You may recall that during Advent, we've been singing Christmas carols that have a verse that has been forgotten or ignored, left out of most contemporary hymnals. Today's carol is “O Come, All Ye Faithful.”

Today, we sing a 19th century version of this hymn, which was originally written in the middle of the 18th century, in Latin, by the English composer John Francis Wade for a Catholic community. Three verses were added to Wade's original four verses around 1822, and an eighth was added a few decades later. In the middle of the 19th century, some of the

¹ John Berquist, in an interview with Marcia McFee, *Worship Design Studio*, www.worshipdesignstudio.com,

² Isaac S. Villegas, “The politics of Mary,” *Christian Century*, 2 December 2020, p. 37.

verses were translated into English.³ Eventually all eight verses were translated, though today, few hymnals have more than four of the eight verses—at least among Protestant hymnals. Verse two is often left out, a verse that draws heavily from the Nicene Creed. The eighth verse is about the Magi and is typically left out, too. However, the often left-out verse that I want to focus on is the fifth verse.

This fifth verse connects with Mary’s song in several ways, most importantly because it reminds us both of our humility (our lowliness) and of how deeply loved we are. While we may, in many ways, be the powerful that Mary sings will be brought low, we are also, in many ways, lowly and in need of healing. Take a look at the lyrics of the fifth verse:

Child, for us sinners
poor and in the manger,
Fain we embrace thee, with awe and love:
Who would not love thee,
loving us so dearly?
O come, let us adore him ...

Professor of Sacred Music C. Michael Hawn notes, “The fifth stanza takes a decidedly different tone, placing us not only at the manger scene as one of the humble who have come to see the Christ child, but actually in the manger! Note that there is no comma after ‘sinners,’ indicating that it is not just the ‘Child’ in the manger, but we who join him there in humility, ‘awe and love.’” Then Hawn suggests, “the rhetorical question leaves us almost unable to sing the refrain aloud.”⁴ “Who would not love thee, loving us so dearly?”

Perhaps we can hear in Mary’s song the invitation to do some soul searching, to figure out where we fit in the cosmic order of God’s reign. Perhaps we can let Mary’s hopeful and convicting words draw us deeper into an appreciation for and an acceptance of God’s grace. It is only by God’s grace that I think Mary was able to sing these words of hope and transformation in the face of the reality she saw when she viewed the world from her room. And in that grace, Mary learned to view the world as God does: through the eyes of love.

“Love redeems,” wrote the late bell hooks. “Despite all the lovelessness that surrounds us, nothing has been able to block our longing for love, the intensity of our yearning. The understanding that love redeems appears to be a resilient aspect of the heart’s knowledge. The healing power of redemptive love lures us and calls us towards the possibility of healing. Like all great mysteries, we are all mysteriously called to love no matter the conditions of our lives, the degree of our depravity or despair. The persistence of this call gives us reason to hope. Without hope, we cannot return to love.”⁵

³ “Adeste, Fideles,” *Hymns and Carols of Christmas*, https://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/NonEnglish/adeste_fideles.htm (accessed 18 December 2021).

⁴ C. Michael Hawn, “History of Hymns: ‘O Come, All Ye Faithful,’” *Discipleship Ministries, UMC*, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-o-come-all-ye-faithful> (posted 20 May 2013; accessed 8 December 2021).

⁵ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions*, quoted by Ibram X. Kendi on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/ibramxkendi/posts/460197198797980> (posted and accessed 15 December 2021).

Regardless of where our rooms are and what they look out upon, let us learn to view the world as God does, with eyes of grace-filled love. In doing so, I believe we will make room for the holy. Amen.