

**Magnificat**  
**Advent 4**  
**Luke 1:39-55**  
**A “Crossings” by Robert W. Bertram**

[Presented at the Order of Phillipis in Cape Coral, Fl., November, 2000.]

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.  
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;  
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
And his mercy is on those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm,  
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,  
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,  
and exalted those of low degree;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent empty away.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
as he spoke to our fathers,  
to Abraham and to his posterity for ever."

**Diagnosis: Singing Alone**

**Initial Diagnosis (External Problem):**

Must every text have a "problem," even when the text is, like Mary's "Magnificat," one long, pent-up outcry of victory and jubilation? Good question. On the other hand, if there is in this story a problem at all, that may be it exactly: Mary seems to have had no one with whom she could share her wondrous secret, and not just the secret itself -- the bare news -- but the utter joy of it, the sheer goodness of the news. Like her kinswoman

Elizabeth, who upon becoming pregnant "hid herself for five months" (v. 24), Mary too must have had to stifle her exuberance as if she were harboring some guilty secret. For she was, after all, "of low estate" and "low degree" and all the moreso for being a woman and pregnant, unmarried to boot, and most shocking of all, pregnant with "the Son of God." Whom, except for poor old Elizabeth, could she possibly tell?

**Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem):**

But the worse problem, worse than the external circumstances which silenced Mary's good news, was the problem which afflicted those in her society who were party to her silencing: "the proud in the imagination of their hearts," "the mighty [on] their thrones," "the rich." They begin to sound like us, don't they? So the worse problem, worse than Mary's having to keep her secret to herself, is the problem of us who imagine ourselves too superior to believe her secret, let alone delight in it. Shame on us.

**Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem):**

Worse still is what finally happens to the silencers: "scattered," "put down," "sent empty away" and, on top of that, replaced by the very ones whom they had demeaned and humiliated. Who is it who so turns the tables on "the mighty?" Answer: "He who [truly] is mighty," "the Lord." But he does so through (of all people) the Marys, "the hungry," "the handmaids." Does Mary gloat over this awesome reversal? I think not. What she does is "fear, though not as "the mighty" do: she fears God. And that only underscores how terrifying the fate of "the mighty" really is.

**Prognosis: Sing Alongs**

**Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution):**

The most conspicuous part of The Solution, though not yet the whole of it, is The Baby himself whom Mary was carrying. That is where the whole cosmic upset begins, that "the child to be born of you," Mary, yourself scarcely older than a child, "will be called holy, the Son of God" (v. 35). It is with the inexpressible marvel of this Incarnation that the entire revolution commences: God's remembering the promise to Israel, God's regarding the low estate of this handmaiden, God's showing mercy precisely on this humble girl who fears him -- by, of all things, blessing her with the motherhood of God's own Son. Everything else which ensues is history: exalting those of low degree, filling the hungry with good things. After that, what's left except to sing?

**Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution):**

And for that too, for Mary's singing, God provides the wherewithal, beginning with the requisite exuberance. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." It is clearly a love song, addressed -- as any love song must be -- directly to the beloved. But to God? Isn't that being too forward, a bit too intimate? Not after what God has done for her, and she was trusting enough to believe him. Believing makes for singing.

**Final Prognosis (External Solution):**

Best of all, God provides the ecstatic Mary with what she had so yearned for all along, an audience, someone with whom she could share her bursting Good News. And who could more naturally appreciate Mary's joy than her kinswoman, Elizabeth, who was bursting with similar good news of her own? Amidst all the people of the human race these two alone were soul-mates in an extraordinary conspiracy, moreso even than Zechariah and Joseph could be. Even a stodgy old male can envy the two women's giddiness. Even a skeptical historian can imagine why Mary, right in the other woman's presence, would break into such a song. Song to whom? To God, really. So Mary's audience was even bigger than anything she could have hoped for. For, with God in her audience, who has trouble keeping such secrets, Mary's song was bound sooner or later to become common knowledge, a world favorite. When Mary anticipated that "all generations will call me blessed" she -- who at first had no one she could tell -- could not have guessed who all would be blessing her: even we. And we do, yet not just as her audience but as her sing alongs.