

## The women show the way

19 December 2021  
High Street Uniting Church Frankston  
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**Read: Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-55**

“Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?”

*God of surprises, open our hearts and our senses that we may receive your word of grace and rejoice to see your coming kingdom. Amen.*

This is a wonderful passage, really significant for the approach to Christmas, full of joy and absurdity and wonder!

Here we have two women: the older Elizabeth, well past childbearing age; and the younger Mary, perhaps too young even to marry. And here, we have their voices.

So often women’s voices are devalued, but here, GOD makes a point of overturning that. In fact, Luke’s gospel opens with Gabriel appearing to Zechariah the priest, soon to be the father of John the Baptist, and at Zechariah’s reluctance to accept the message he is literally silenced.

And then Gabriel goes to Mary – no sign of Joseph, at this point in Luke’s account – and Mary accepts the role given to her. Having heard from Gabriel about Elizabeth’s pregnancy, Mary hurries to see her older relative, and we have this delightful encounter. And, in fact, we’re told that they share hospitality for most of Elizabeth’s third trimester, with no significant sign of the men.

The very first announcements and celebration of Jesus, even before John the Baptist, are in the voices and joy of these women.

We hear Elizabeth’s voice first. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, blesses this young relative of hers, Mary, giving her enormous encouragement in a time when surely the world would have seemed against her.

The older woman has much to give to Mary. And yet Elizabeth says “Why has this happened to me...?” Why has God brought you across my path? Why has God brought you to me? What do I have to offer?

These are great questions that we might often ask too, to which we are not given answers. Why come to me? Surely God would do God’s business through the professional, through Zechariah, through the priest.

Here, plainly, God does NOT work primarily through the professional minister. By the grace and Spirit of God, the sharing of blessing comes through the shared hospitality of these two women, old and young. Both have something important to offer the another.

Could it be that God might bring surprising blessing to and through you, in encounters that God lines up, even over these next weeks? Maybe and especially in intergenerational encounters?

God works through women – and men – like this. (For the men I might add: a little further on in the story it's going to be shepherds, out of their comfort zone, but offering comfort and care for a very young family in a stable.)

But back to Mary's voice, now.

Mary responds in song: a song of praise and of protest – rejoicing in God's overturning of convention and power structures, echoing the songs of other women in Scripture. In front of the angel Gabriel Mary was humble; here, she finds her voice, and she recognises and celebrates that God is doing something wonderful. Through this young woman, close to the edges of society in her unwed pregnancy, God's praise sounds.

The song has depth: my *soul* magnifies the LORD – where soul means something like my whole being. Mary's life has been turned upside down but in the midst of it her whole being recognises the God's Spirit at work. She goes on, "My *spirit* rejoices in God my Saviour", but remember that Spirit also translates as breath: this is an expansive, physical, bodily expression of praise, initially for what God has done for her, a lowly servant, a peasant.

When we hear the voices of young women, like the 18 year old Selina Leem from the Marshall Islands, speaking at the Climate Change Summit about the vulnerability of that island nation, we might get closer to imagining what Mary's voice here is like – a small voice, with a song of justice and hope for the lowly. Do we learn from the story of Mary that young women's voices from the margins, not the powerful, may carry the message of God?

As if to reinforce that, our reading from the prophet Micah talks about salvation not coming from the main centre of power: not Rome, or Canberra, or Melbourne, but Bethlehem, which is just down there off a little bit to the south of the big city. Where God is at work, not least among the women.

And what Mary celebrates in her song is that God has lifted her up, and that indeed, God lifts up the lowly; God scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; God sends the rich away empty...

She foreshadows exactly what happens in Jesus' ministry. Do we see that still happening in the ministry that we share in, now? In Luke's gospel we see Jesus' concern for the poor; and

the responses of the rich who either discover hospitality, sharing and joy or else turn away sad. We see the critique of the pharisaic pride, and mercy to God's people.

The gift of this reading is that *preceding* the birth of Jesus we have these two women, from different generations, sharing blessing with each other and celebrating God's regard for the lowly and hope for the nation.

Mary's song, after Elizabeth's encouragement, moves from her own deep response to recognising that God's hope is not just for her, God's lowly servant, but more broadly for God's servant, Israel – for her own people under the rule of the Romans.

Maybe it's not about us – if we don't identify with the downtrodden. But then, maybe it is about us, because we too are invited to respond. We are invited to recognise that the Spirit of God who works in these two women to testify to the gospel can work through us, too.

Let us pray.

*Gracious God, you see past our pretensions and you know us as we are. As you brought blessing and grace through the sharing of Elizabeth and Mary, enable us to recognise your Spirit in the encouragements we share with all your loved ones, as humble as they or we may be. And so continue to lift the lowly, and let us know your blessing in the whole of our souls. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*