

St. Mary the Virgin
Luke 1:46-55

Upside Down*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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In southwest Italy, about three hours south of Rome, there is an ancient abbey located high in the mountains outside of Naples. The cathedral church of the abbey contains a icon of the Virgin Mary called Our Lady of Montevergine. Just like last week, this artwork can be seen on the cover of your bulletin. It is a special image for a number of reasons.

First, tradition holds that the face of the icon was painted by St. Luke the Evangelist, the author of the third gospel and today's gospel text of the Magnificat. According to this tradition, St. Luke's painting migrated over the course of several centuries from Jerusalem to Constantinople and finally to southern Italy, where it was incorporated into this icon.

Second, the local people have a nickname for this icon. They call it "Mamma Schiavona," which means "slave mother." According to the local peasants, the dark complexion of the icon identifies her as one of the servant class. The *paisanos* love Mamma Schiavona because she is one of them. In fact, she is the mother of all who do hard labor. To the locals, she is the most beautiful of all the madonnas.

Third, and perhaps most interesting, the icon is a popular pilgrimage destination for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people from all across Italy. Legend has it that, in the winter of the year 1256, two men were caught holding hands and kissing each other. They were brutally beaten, expelled from their village, and left to die in the mountains of Naples. But Mamma Schiavona looked with pity upon them. She let sunshine break through the ice and snow, and she saved them.

Mamma Schiavona's love for those who are on the margins of society continues to this day. Specifically, the *femminielli* of Naples are among her most devoted pilgrims. The *femminielli* are a class of effeminate men in Neapolitan society who – like the hijras in India or the kathoeyes in Thailand – constitute a third gender of sorts. They identify neither as men nor as women, but rather as a category unto themselves. For hundreds of years, the *femminielli* have turned traditional gender norms upside down, as well as venerated Mamma Schiavona as their spiritual mother.

Today, we celebrate the Feast of St. Mary the Virgin. It is an anticipated feast because the actual date of the feast is August 15th, two days from now. August 15th is

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the traditional date on which Christians commemorate the falling asleep (or dormition) of the Virgin Mary, as well as her assumption – that is, being taken up to heaven in bodily form.

The Anglican tradition has always had an uneasy relationship with the Virgin Mary. Like the other reformers, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was concerned that excessive Marian devotions were unbiblical and would diminish the uniqueness of Jesus Christ's role as the savior of humanity. As such, the Feast of the Assumption never made it into the first Book of Common Prayer. It was only after the rise of Anglo-Catholicism in the 19th century that August 15th was reinstated as a Marian feast day.

Even today, some people find the Virgin Mary to be problematic. We had quite the heated discussion at this past Thursday night's Bible study session about the catholic versus the protestant view about Mary. Was she a perpetual virgin? Was she immaculately conceived, and thus born without original sin? Was she assumed into heaven in bodily form? And where are those doctrines found in the Bible?

For me, the power of Mary lies not so much in abstract theological doctrines, but more in the practices of popular devotion, such as visiting a Marian shrine, praying the rosary, or saying the Angelus. It is through these embodied spiritual practices that we enter into a relationship with the Mother of God.

Through our relationship with Mary, we come to understand that she is the one who can intercede on our behalf to Christ Jesus. As Michael said to me once, praying to Mary is sort of like going to Mom first instead of Dad whenever you are in big trouble. As *theotokos*, or the God bearer, Mary is a powerful bridge between us and the Trinity.

Through our relationship with Mary, we also come to understand that she will protect and comfort us in the midst of spiritual and physical troubles. We are especially in need of this protection and comfort today, in the aftermath of the horrific violence and domestic terrorism that occurred yesterday at the white supremacist and alt-right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Finally, it is through our relationship with Mary that we come to understand the revolutionary nature of God's love, and how God turns the powers and principalities of this world upside down. That's what today's gospel text of the Magnificat – as well as the icon of Mamma Schiavona – is all about.

In the Magnificat, Mary rejoices and gives thanks to God for calling her to be the means by which the Word becomes flesh. Despite the fact that she is just an ordinary young woman from an ordinary town in an ordinary part of the ancient world, Mary has been called by God to do extraordinary things.

Indeed, this ordinary young woman is the means by which God will turn the world upside down through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Mary prophesizes that,

through her, God will scatter the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God will bring down the powerful from their thrones. And God will send the rich away empty.

We live in troubling times. Whenever I turn on the cable news, it seems like the proud, the powerful, and the rich are taking more and more away from the humble, the weak, and the poor. Take the treatment of the LGBT community as an example. Just three weeks ago, our nation saw a tweet that banned transgender people from serving in the armed forces. On the very same day, the federal government filed a brief arguing that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act does not in fact protect LGBT people from employment discrimination.

These actions are fundamentally opposed to the good news of God's kingdom. As Mary promises us in the Magnificat – and as Mamma Schiavona promises the femminielli in Naples – God will lift up the lowly. God will fill the hungry with good things. And God will remember the mercy that God has promised to God's servants.

Two weeks ago, Michael Curry, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, issued a strong statement against the attempts to ban trans people from serving in the military and to allow employers to discriminate against people on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. The Presiding Bishop wrote that his stance was not born from secular values, but rather was born of “the witness of our biblical and theological tradition.” For Bishop Curry, the moral principle of equality for the LGBTQ community flows from his identity “as a follower of Jesus Christ, as Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, and as a citizen who loves this country.”

Today, at the end of mass, we will be participating in the ancient liturgical tradition of the Angelus. Father John David will sing this beautiful prayer after the dismissal, facing the Mary shrine, in honor of St. Mary the Virgin. Like the pilgrims who visit Mamma Schiavona in the mountains outside of Naples, we are also invited to venerate the Virgin Mary as the mother of us all – but especially as a mother to the lowly, the hungry, and the servants of God.

May we, like St. Mary the Virgin, be filled with God's grace so that we can help to usher in God's kingdom and to turn the world upside-down.