



God's topsy-turvy kingdom

God is turning a world torn apart by conflict, right-side-up

BY HANNAH HAWKINSON

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!” So begins Mary’s song of praise, a song that we today call the “Magnificat.” For many of us, this holy song is a familiar and favorite one—and for good reason! It’s one of our most central texts during the season of Advent—one that our church returns to year after year.

Because Mary’s song is so familiar, it’s easy to miss just how revolutionary it is. At its core, the Magnificat is a song about God’s mighty acts in the life of a young woman—a young woman who happens to be pregnant out of wedlock. This song proclaims God’s justice and peace in a world torn apart by war, conflict and violence. It declares that God is turning the world upside-down—or perhaps, right-side-up.

As we journey together through these four weeks of Advent, let’s encounter Mary’s sacred, subversive song with fresh eyes and ears and hearts. Let’s also explore other stories of God’s topsy-turvy work across generations.

WEEK 1: GOD WHO SEES

📖 **Read:** Luke 1:46–48a; Genesis 16:1–16

This first week begins with Mary’s proclamation that God “has looked with favor on the lowly state of God’s servant” (Luke 1:48). What a radical statement from Mary—a young woman who is likely no

older than 13 or 14, and in an incredibly vulnerable position. Mary is pregnant and unmarried. Her fiancé Joseph would have had every right to break off their relationship and shame her publicly. It is a precarious moment. Mary’s life and livelihood hang in the balance as God’s people force her to the margins. Yet she proclaims that God has “looked with favor” upon her, smiled upon her, and is with her amid her vulnerability. Where God’s people may look upon her with shame, pity and even disgust, God looks upon her with joy, celebration and pride.

Thousands of years earlier, Hagar has a similar encounter with God. She, too, finds herself in an extremely vulnerable position, pregnant and utterly alone. Enslaved by Abram and Sarai, she has been forced by Sarai to conceive Abram’s firstborn child. And as soon as Hagar becomes pregnant, Sarai, riddled with jealousy, treats her even more “harshly” (Genesis 16:6). Abused and enslaved by God’s people, Hagar flees into the wilderness.

In this precarious moment, when Hagar is at her most vulnerable, God finds her. God calls out to her by name and declares God’s favor. “Now you have conceived and shall bear a son,” God proclaims, “and you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction” (Genesis 16:11).

In response, Hagar boldly declares God’s power and grace by giving God a name. She is the only person in all of scripture to do this! “You are El-Roi,” Hagar proclaims—the “God who sees” (Genesis 16:13).

Talk about turning the world right-side-up! God who sees looks with favor, not on the most powerful in our midst, but on the most vulnerable—those whom we as God’s people fail, reject and marginalize. Thanks be to God, God is at work beyond our failings, turning the world right-side-up. God invites us to join in this repair work, to repent of our sin and to rejoice in God’s boundless love. God’s topsy-turvy work is our work as well.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Can you think of a time when you were vulnerable or afraid, and you encountered “God who sees”? What was that experience like? How did it feel?
2. Who are the Marys and Hagers in our midst today? Who has the church rejected and forced to the margins?
3. In what ways can we, as God’s people, listen to and learn from others who have been marginalized? Can we follow their lead, as we seek to make things right?

WEEK 2: THE APPEARANCE ILLUSION

■ **Read:** Luke 1:48b–50; Exodus 1:1–22

Crafty, cunning, deceitful—these words aren’t often used to describe the heroes in a story. But in this week’s story from the Book of Exodus, God’s faithfulness to God’s people is revealed in the cleverness and quick thinking of two often forgotten women: Shiphrah and Puah.

Generations after a brutal famine caused the Israelites to migrate to Egypt for food, they are thriving, so much so “that the land [is] filled with them” (Exodus 1:7). But the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, fearing the prosperous Israelites will overthrow him, forces them into slavery. Desperate to preserve his power by any means possible, the Pharaoh demands that Shiphrah and Puah, the two Israelite midwives, do the unthinkable: kill all Israelite baby boys the moment they are born.

Shiphrah and Puah are caught in an impossible dilemma: Will they do as Pharaoh demands to protect themselves and their loved ones from his violent wrath, even when it means that their people will suffer and die? Or, for the sake of their people,

will they refuse Pharaoh’s demands, putting them and their loved ones directly in the line of fire of the mightiest man in Egypt?

Surprisingly, Shiphrah and Puah decide to take a third way: They get into some holy trouble by outsmarting Pharaoh at his own game! The two slyly undercut this ruler’s power and authority over the Israelites—while also keeping themselves and their families safe. Continuing to help Israelite women give birth to all their children, Shiphrah and Puah keep Pharaoh at bay with a cleverly crafted lie: “The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them” (Exodus 1:19). Expertly playing to Pharaoh’s elitism and vanity, Shiphrah and Puah save their people through their cunning and quick thinking. As a result, “God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong” (Exodus 1:20).

Nothing is impossible with God! Faced with brutal injustice, deep danger and inhumane oppression, two seemingly powerless women outwit the most powerful man in Egypt. Through them, God blesses all the Israelites, who continue to be fruitful and multiply for generations.

This is just one of many examples of God’s faithfulness to God’s people, from generation to generation. In times of oppression, violence and persecution, God who sees is present and at work—turning the world right-side-up in surprising ways, through surprising people.

It’s easy to miss the Shiphrahs and Puahs in our midst. They don’t usually receive any glory or recognition. But even the smallest acts of holy trouble, even the simplest acts of resistance against evil and oppression, make waves for generations to come. It is as Mary sings: “Indeed, God’s mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation” (Luke 1:50).

Share aloud or reflect:

4. Can you think of some surprising people, from biblical times to the present day, through whom God has worked across generations to usher in God's reign of justice and peace?
5. In your own life, have you encountered any Shiphrahs or Puahs?
6. How can we follow in Shiphrah and Puah's footsteps? Where do you think God might be calling you to get into some holy trouble?

WEEK 3: LIFTING UP THE LOWLY

📖 **Read:** Luke 1:51-53; 1 Samuel 2:1-10

There are few things I love more than “David and Goliath” stories. The little guy takes on the bully; the longshot athlete finally gets their moment of glory; a young shepherd defeats the mightiest warrior with nothing but a slingshot and some stones. Stories like these are just so satisfying. Almost like fairy tales, they offer an escape from the seemingly immovable power structures of our world.

I also love these stories because it's so easy to imagine myself as the “David,” the little guy, the long shot. We're all the heroes in our own stories, right? When we read “David and Goliath” stories, we don't have to imagine ourselves in a more complex way. We are simply the hero, and that is that.

But Mary's song invites us to consider that we might have some “Goliath” in us, too. Her words call us to embrace the reality that God's reign of justice and peace will make us uncomfortable. Because God's topsy-turvy gospel doesn't leave any of us unchanged. “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly!” Mary

sings. “God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty!” These David and Goliath stories are the very core of God's topsy-turvy gospel across all generations—including in the life of Mary's ancestor Hannah.

Like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and countless women before and after her, Hannah is deeply grieved by her inability to bear children. Even though her husband is kind and loving, she feels the social pressures and shame of her barrenness. She cries out to God in prayer: “O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant and remember me!” (1 Samuel 1:11)

Sure enough, God does remember Hannah, and she bears a son, Samuel. Hannah, like Mary, lifts her voice in praise and thanksgiving for God's mighty acts of justice and peace: “The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.” God, Hannah declares, “raises up the poor from the dust [and] lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor” (1 Samuel 2:4-5a, 8a).

God's topsy-turvy gospel doesn't leave any of us unchanged. The mighty will be brought down. The hungry, thirsty, feeble and lowly will be lifted up. But if we're being totally honest, this radical, topsy-turvy, “David and Goliath” work of God makes many of us a bit uncomfortable, doesn't it? We realize that we might not always be the “David.” We just might be among those rich and powerful who will be brought down.

In the face of this reality, we can certainly choose to cling to our comfort with closed fists. We can dig in our heels and refuse to join in the song of Hannah and Mary, Shiphrah and Puah, Sarah and Rebekah, Rachel and Hagar. But God calls us to a new way...a different way...a more joyful, life-giving way.

We can embrace our discomfort. We can choose to courageously give up our power and open our

hands—even when it’s scary to do so. Making ourselves also vulnerable, we can join in the song. We can rejoice in the good news of God’s topsy-turvy kingdom, even when we’re not sure how we’ll get there. We can choose to join in God’s topsy-turvy work of justice and peace, even when we don’t have all the answers.

Share aloud or reflect:


7. When in your life have you been “David” fighting Goliath? How has God lifted you up in moments of distress and need?
8. When in your life have you been “Goliath,” or part of Goliath-like systems of power? How might you begin to own this reality and step into the discomfort that comes with that?
9. In what ways does God’s topsy-turvy work of justice and peace make you uncomfortable? (It’s all right to admit it: Turning the world right-side-up won’t leave any of us unchanged, and change is difficult!) Are there systems God’s topsy-turvy work might disrupt, or wounds it might uncover? What might it be like for you to embrace your discomfort and learn and grow, as we all participate together in God’s topsy-turvy work in the world?

WEEK 4: ABRAHAM AND HIS DESCENDANTS

📖 **Read:** Luke 1:54–55; Matthew 1:1–17

As a child, I couldn’t stand reading the genealogies found throughout our scriptures. “I wasn’t there!” I would say to my parents and Sunday school teachers. “And I’m not a part of this old-timey Bible





family! Why should this even matter to me?” While the genealogies are certainly not the most thrilling or action-packed scriptural passages, as I’ve grown older, I’ve discovered that they’re included for a reason. They have a whole lot of good news to share with us, if we read them with open hearts.

In this final week of Advent, with Christmas on the horizon, we come to the very beginning of the Gospel of Matthew, which outlines Jesus’s ancestry, all the way back to Abraham. Some names may be familiar—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Boaz, David, Solomon—but for most of us, many names may be new. And it’s easy to get lost in the monotonous rhythm, isn’t it? “So and so was the father of so and so, and him the father of him, and this guy the father of this guy...”

Now read the passage again. This time, focus on which women are mentioned and named in Jesus’s genealogy. Did you notice their names?

Five women are named in Jesus’s genealogy:

- Tamar is a woman whose livelihood is carelessly tossed about by her father-in-law Judah, until she secures her place in his family through trickery and deceit (Genesis 38).

- Rahab is a Canaanite prostitute who helped the Israelites capture her own home city of Jericho (Joshua 2).

- Ruth is a Moabite woman and immigrant to Judah who becomes the great-grandmother of King David (Ruth).

- Bathsheba, the “wife of Uriah,” is a woman repeatedly objectified by King David and forced by him into adultery, widowhood and second marriage (2 Samuel 11-12, 1 Kings 1-2).

- Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a young girl, likely no older than 13 or 14, who is pregnant out of wedlock (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John).

What a motley crew! All these women are outsiders, in more ways than one. Some aren’t even Israelites! We can see that, in one way or another, all are forced to be pawns in men’s games, and all are cast away to the margins by God’s people. Yet

each one of these women is central to God's work in the world. Each one is an essential member of God's family and the line of David.

So it is that Jesus' genealogy reveals another way God is turning the world right-side-up. In our life together as God's people, God not only invites outsiders to join us—God actively weaves those whom we reject into the very fabric of our story. Listen to Mary sing the conclusion of her holy song: "God has come to the aid of God's child Israel, in remembrance of God's mercy, according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever" (Luke 1:54-55, NRSV Updated Edition, see <http://tiny.cc/NRSVue>).

Throughout this season of Advent, we've reflected together on the ways that God's topsy-turvy Gospel is turning the world right-side-up. From generation to generation, our God who sees is keeping God's promises to God's people, looking with favor on those who are oppressed, lifting up the lowly, and sending the mighty away empty.

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, may we give thanks for God's topsy-turvy work. May we rejoice in the ways God continues to turn the world right-side-up through our Lord Jesus, who comes to us, in true topsy-turvy fashion, not as a mighty warrior or powerful king, but as a helpless baby born to a poor family. Thanks be to God!

CLOSING ACTIVITIES

- Take a moment and reread the entirety of Mary's song (Luke 1:46-55). What about her song now stands out for you?
- The ELCA has adopted a variety of social statements to help us own our failure and sin, work to make things right and join anew in God's topsy-turvy work in the world. Find these at: <https://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements>. Read one (or many!) and dream together about how you, your congregation or your Bible study group might join in this important topsy-turvy work! 🌿

