

“The Bible verse even Martin Luther feared to translate”
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Isaiah 35:1-10 and Luke 1:47-55

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It’s that time of year again—when Christmas songs fill the radio, and trees shimmer with lights of every hue, and presents accumulate wrapped in shiny paper. Or as comedian Lewis Black says, “Christmas—the season when Christians celebrate the birth of Santa.”

Nothing against Santa, of course! But it’s easy for things to get mixed up, isn’t it?

I was thinking about this last weekend when Jenna and I saw the new movie about Mr. Rogers. Here you have this man trained in child psychology, broadcasting, and theology, an ordained Presbyterian minister, who has a profound and lasting impact on millions of children, is absolutely beloved, and yet very few adults understood him. They couldn’t understand why this hokey, slow-speaking guy with cheap sets was so appealing to their children. They found him boring and naive. They disliked his long silences; and to be fair, he did once have an entire minute of silent broadcasting as we watched the second hand on a clock go round, so we could learn what a minute felt like. Not exactly thrilling television!

When Fred Rogers created a show for adults, it failed. Comedians made fun of him; people trivialized his work. Now, of course, a lot of that has changed, but for awhile, Fred suffered, because people didn’t take him seriously. People didn’t see what he was doing—and those who did, some of them, hated him for it. When he died people protested his funeral, saying he was burning in hell. And though Fred was a lifetime Republican, the hosts of Fox and Friends in 2007 called him “an evil, evil man” who ruined whole generations by telling them that they were special and loved for no other reason than for who they were.

While many adults dismissed this as pablum, his enemies saw it for what it was: dangerous. Turns out that the kindest and gentlest man you’d ever meet, a cardigan-wearing puppeteer, was a revolutionary.

Beneath the simplicity of his show, Fred talked about things no one ever talked about with children: war, racism, gun violence, sexism, divorce, death. It was Mr. Rogers who in his very first week on television talked about a king who built walls and tried to stop change. It was Mr. Rogers who shared a pool with a black man on public television in an era of segregation—and asked that same man to be a police officer on his show. It was Mr. Rogers who taught people with disabilities, and little children of color, and little girls, and LGBTQ people, that they were worthy of love and did not need to accept the subjugated status given to them by their bullies. It was Mr. Rogers who said that our feelings matter, who said that our lives matter, who taught us that compassion and solidarity are the better foundations of a society than greed and predation. It was Mr. Rogers who showed us what it means to love.

Children understood this. They got it—immediately. Most adults either dismissed him, or feared him. Only the children truly understood his message, and it's fair to say: it changed whole generations.

“From now on all generations will call me blessed,” says Mary, mother of Jesus, who when you think about it is not all that different from Mr. Rogers—one through whom the world will change, one who knew the value of a child; beloved, and yet fundamentally misunderstood.

We've heard her song of praise, her Magnificat, so many times that it's become for many a sweet fixture of Christmas, as innocuous as the season itself, as meek and mild as we believe the woman herself. And yet, just like Mr. Rogers, there were those who saw her—and the life she bore inside her—as dangerous. She and her family were hunted, threatened with death, forced to flee their country. And when it came time for her words many centuries later to be translated into the common tongue, so that all could understand them, many hesitated, out of fear.

We rightly remember Martin Luther as the reformer who dared believe that all God's people should have direct access to God's word in the Bible. Luther translated the Bible into the vernacular German of the day. He wasn't the first to do so, but he did lead the movement that brought Scripture into everyone's homes and hearts.

And yet, even this mighty reformer was afraid to translate one section of the Bible: Mary's Magnificat (cf. Krin Van Tatenhove). It was so controversial, so radical, so dangerous, that he considered leaving it in its Latin form. Of all the texts in the Bible, Mary's song alone gave him pause. There were other texts whose faithfulness and orthodoxy Luther questioned (he was no fan of James or the Book of Revelation). But only this one scared him.

Long before Jesus ever talked about the last becoming first, and the first last, long before he flipped tables and declared good news to the poor, freedom to the captive, long before any man or woman ever uttered a word of the gospel, it was Mary who spoke in that small room with Elizabeth, two women huddled together, co-conspirators of a new world order. Her words are too direct to spiritualize away. When she says that the powerful are torn from their thrones, there would have been no doubt in 1st century Palestine; these were seditious words, treasonous, no less than the Declaration of Independence, for those thrones were occupied—by King Herod (named just verses earlier in Luke) and by the Emperor Augustus (named just verses later in Luke). Mary says that the proud are scattered and the rich robbed, while the hungry are filled and the disempowered lifted up.

She sings in the spirit of the sisterhood of prophets, of Miriam, Deborah, and Hannah, whose words inspire her own, each praising God and announcing with their songs the beginning of a new era, their words like pivots at critical moments in the history of God's people: Miriam upon the exodus from slavery, Deborah upon the birth of a nation, Hannah upon freedom from Philistine oppression, and now Mary, at the height of Roman occupation and colonization (cf. Randall Bailey). Yes, these are proclamations of a spiritual kingdom, of a liberation from sin and death, a reunion of faithfulness with God—but for each, that kingdom was connected with the historical, material reality of their existence. They would have more than food in heaven; they would have bread today. Life today. Love today.

That's what scared Luther—not a woman meek and mild kneeling, but a woman with her fist in the air.

Luther did care about Mary's song. He wrote a whole treatise on it—but for the nobility, not the peasants. He reassures the nobles that surely she didn't mean that the world order would change, lifting the lowly to positions of power; their thrones were safe as long as they were faithful to God.

Luther and his colleagues in the Reformation had inspired the people of Germany. He had stood up to both the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor. He had spoken about the priesthood and freedom of all believers, and the primacy of Scripture over any human law. The starving peasants of Germany took his teachings and demanded rights and freedom based on Scripture. Martin Luther sympathized with their cause. He named and condemned the poverty and suffering of the people. But Luther didn't dare alienate the lords and princes upon whom his Reformation depended, and when the peasants revolted, he (to his credit) wrestled with the dilemma, pleaded with the nobles to right these injustices, but ultimately he sided with the powerful and called upon the bloody suppression of the revolt, concluding in the deaths of 100,000 peasants and in the overall reduction of rights and freedoms.

And so it continues to this day. People refusing to take Mary at her word.

Luther was right about one thing, though: Mary says God makes these changes, not us. If we're at the helm, sin will inevitably intrude, hurting others and changing nothing. All too often in history, would-be liberators become tyrants. Only God can create true loving change, because only God is pure love, pure goodness, pure justice. What God does in Jesus isn't Mary's doing; it's God's. She is an object and conduit of grace. And yet, what Luther forgets is that God could have done none of it, without Mary. God graced the world with Jesus through Mary, which required her choice, her labor, her motherhood, her speech, her action. The *theotokos*, the God-bearer, is not passive, but active—in her consent and her proclamation.

As bearers of the divine image, as *theotokoi* ourselves, we are to affirm one another, as Mary and Elizabeth did, as Mr. Rogers did, in the gospel vision of a new world, in which the lowly are lifted high, in which love reigns supreme, in which power and wealth are gutted. We are to act and speak—witness—to this vision. We will know it is God's, and not ours, when we accept its threat even to our own power and privilege, when we allow it to unseat us from *our* thrones, when we are humbled, not aggrandized, by it, when it leads us to love and serve our neighbor simply for who they are.

There's only One who's going to bring about that kind of revolution this Christmas—and it ain't Santa. **Amen.**