

“A Modern Magnificat,” a sermon based on Luke 1:46-55
Preached by the Rev. Elizabeth Smith-Bartlett
at The Larchmont Avenue Church
December 10, 2017 (Advent 2B)

Last week before the worship service started, I was checking in with the Manice family about lighting the Advent wreath candle—details like when to come up, where to stand, what to do. And little James, the oldest Manice son, looked over at the pulpit with wide eyes, and pointed, and asked, “Who stands there?”

“The preacher,” I said. “The person who gives the sermon.”

“I would like to stand there someday,” he answered, with a little twinkle in his eye.

After the service ended, I was thanking the Manices for their participation, and the pulpit was still on James’ mind—someday wasn’t a dream for the future, but a dream for that day. Again, he pointed and asked if he could go up the steps to stand here. Of course, I said, and he bounded up, only to realize that he couldn’t see over top on account of his height.

This pulpit was not built for him.

I felt for him. This pulpit was not built for me either.

At 5’4” I’m average height for a woman, but short for a man (this pulpit was built before women could be ordained, you see) and so on preaching Sundays, I have to make sure that I wear my heels because I need these extra three inches.

And if you’ve observed that I don’t move much when I preach, it’s because my elbows are a little too close to top of the pulpit and it constantly feels like I’m going to hit them if I’m not careful. Standing in here feels like I’m standing in a pod. A taller person wouldn’t have this issue. The majority of men wouldn’t have this issue.

Is this a big deal? No, it’s really not...but it is something that I’m aware of every time I step into this pulpit.

Friday morning at the gym was a lower body workout day, and we started with deadlifts and front squats. A middle aged man who has recently joined our class was deadlifting while I was squatting, and when it was my turn to deadlift, he asked if the weight he had used was ok for me.

Well, actually, no—I usually start with twice that weight.

So I added the plates and told him that he could adjust when it was his turn. He made a face, and said he wanted to try the heavier weight—“I was just going light so I wouldn’t hurt myself,” he explained.

So then the next round I added more weight, and again, he refused to take any plates off. A third round, and the same thing. Fourth and final round, same thing. I complimented him at the end—he had done more than he thought he could, and that’s worth celebrating. “Well, I couldn’t take any of them off if *you* were doing it,” was his reply.

Is this a big deal? No, it’s really not...but it does make me feel smaller, less accomplished, and not as proud of all of my hard work.

But there have been bigger deals:

The man who attended a funeral I officiated several years ago, and later described me as “that hot pastor” to a church member he happened to know.

The parishioner in a former church who looked me up and down every Sunday after the service was over.

The college intern who regularly made inappropriate comments about my body in front of his supervisor, who happened to be one of my coworkers and also happened to regularly make inappropriate comments about my body.

The hospital patient who exposed himself to me during a chaplain visit.

It is safe to assume that most if not all of the women in this sanctuary have had experiences like this and have these kinds of stories to share...stories of being belittled or sexualized or harassed or abused.

The #MeToo movement has given a voice to these experiences and stories, filling the headlines and our newsfeeds these past months, and catapulting the Silence Breakers into the coveted position of Time Magazine’s Person of the Year for 2017.

Actor Tracee Ellis Ross guest hosted Jimmy Kimmel’s late night talk show this past week, and she used the platform to comment on what she labeled the “Hollywood sexual harassment scandal” by saying, “First of all let’s start with the fact that it isn’t a sex scandal, it isn’t a Hollywood scandal, it isn’t even a scandal. It is a systemic problem about the abuse of power that takes place across all industries and has enabled a culture of inequity to persist for far too long.”¹

There’s a lot to unpack in this statement, and I want to say first and foremost that the issue at hand is bigger and more complicated than saying that all women are victims and all men are guilty. This mindset oversimplifies the issue and does a grave disservice to us all. I’m sure the men in this sanctuary have their own difficult stories and experiences to share, and that the women can identify times when we’ve been part of the problem instead of the solution. I know I can.

¹ Jimmy Kimmel Live! Episode, aired on Dec. 5, 2017. <https://youtu.be/-JTOAA1D4WI>

The greater issue at hand is the abuse of power and the culture of inequity that it creates and maintains, and on this second Sunday of Advent, when we light the candle of peace alongside the candle of hope, Mary's Magnificat rings out with a prophetic response--

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.*

Author Rachel Held Evans reflects that

With the Magnificat, Mary not only announces [the birth of Jesus], she announces the inauguration of a new kingdom, one that stands in stark contrast to every other kingdom—past, present, and future—that relies on violence and exploitation to achieve ‘greatness.’
With the Magnificat, Mary declares that God has indeed chosen sides.
And it’s not with the powerful, but the humble.
It’s not with the rich, but with the poor.
It’s not with the occupying force, but with people on the margins.
It’s not with narcissistic kings, but with an un-wed, un-believed teenage girl entrusted with the holy task of birthing, nursing, and nurturing God.
This is the stunning claim of the incarnation [she writes]:
God [chooses to make] a home among the very people the world casts aside.
And in her defiant prayer, Mary—a dark-skinned woman, a refugee, a religious minority in an occupied land—names this reality.²

This is not gentle Mary meek and mild. This is a woman who believes deep down in her bones that her Creator is a God of holy subversion, a God who is still at work bringing hope and peace where there is despair and destruction. And with the birth of Jesus, that divine hope and prophetic peace are embodied by a powerless child and brought into the world by a vulnerable teenage girl.

²Rachel Held Evans, “Mary, the Magnificat, and an Unsentimental Advent.” Can be accessed at <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/unsentimental-advent>

Beloved, here's the deal: little James Manice will grow up and someday soon he will be the right size for this pulpit. But we as a congregation and as a society have our work cut out for us if we want to make sure that Caitlyn Carpenter³ feels the same way.

Our way forward must be together—women and men having conversations about boundaries and behaviors and working together to right the inequities that have lingered for far too long. In a society and world marked by generation upon generation of patriarchy and toxic masculinity, the future isn't necessarily female, noted New York Times bestselling author Glennon Doyle...but our future relies on us all, women and men, embodying the qualities "that have typically been associated with femininity" to the point where they have been "devalued in women and shamed out of men."⁴ These are qualities like collaboration, listening, bridge-building, humility and service...qualities that Jesus embodied, qualities that set his way apart from the narrative and values of the Empire, qualities that we too are called to bring forth into the world and embody as we prepare our hearts and lives for the birth of Christ once again.

*O come, Desire of nations, bind
all peoples in one heart and mind;
bid envy, strife, and discord cease;
fill the whole world with heaven's peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to thee, O Israel.*

Amen.

³ Author's note: Caitlyn was the youth reader in worship the morning this sermon was preached.

⁴ Interview with Glennon Doyle by Chase Jarvis for *The Chase Jarvis Live Show*. Can be accessed at <https://www.chasejarvis.com/blog/embracing-your-messy-beautiful-life-w-glennon-doyle/>