

Mary's Song, Karen's Pain  
Silencing the "Status of Women" in Canada

By Rev. Linda Yates

December 10, 2006

Luke 1:5-24, 57-80

The Song from Voices United that we participated in today is called "The Song of Zechariah," (p. 900). It is an ancient song of joy and is said to have been sung by Zechariah after he was given back his voice. It has been called the Benedictus by the church since its founding days in the first century. Benedictus means "the Opening Word" in Latin. Zechariah was inspired by the Holy Spirit to sing out and sing out loudly. That seems to happen a lot in the gospel of Luke. Elizabeth was inspired by the Holy Spirit to sing out praise filled prophecy upon observing the arrival of her young cousin Mary. Mary, herself inspired by the Holy Spirit sings the Magnificat, a song so powerful in its promises from God that it has been banned from many a pulpit around the world by repressive regimes. It contains a word from God that strikes fear in the very hearts of those in power. At least, it should strike fear in them.

In our story from Luke, the angel appears to the aged Zechariah behind the curtain in the temple that hid the Holy of Holies, that most sacred God soaked area of the Jerusalem temple, from public view. Zechariah is doing his duty as a temple priest, burning incense on the altar. He was not only astonished and perplexed by the appearance of the angel; he doubts what he is hearing coming from the holy messenger's mouth. In other words, he doubts the promises of God. One can hardly blame Zechariah. Not only has he had the freakish experience of having such a bizarre visitor, the angel has the audacity to suggest that after reaching an age when all child bearing was long, long past, his wife Elizabeth will conceive and bear a son! Zechariah is struck dumb. He can no longer speak. When he emerges from behind the curtain he can only communicate in sign language to the worried worshippers. He has been silenced. By whom? By God? By the Angel? By himself? It is not clear. We do know that upon the circumcision of his son, Zechariah insists that the boy be named John as per the angel's instructions and not, as was the custom of the day, after himself. In the commission of this faithful act, Zechariah experiences another miracle – his voice returns. Immediately, he too sings out all of the things he has been thinking about for those long nine months.

This story has made me ponder long and hard about the silence that had been forced upon Zechariah. He is, essentially, caught without words. This is probably a strange and horrible thing to be visited upon a person whose vocation is temple priest. He is used to speaking a great deal. Suddenly, though, his wife Elizabeth would have to do all of the talking within their domestic arrangement. It is interesting that we are told by Luke that she was shut away for a while during this period. Nonetheless, she sure did an awful lot of powerful talking. She prophesized. She sung holy songs. She confidently supported and comforted her young pregnant unmarried cousin Mary with profound words as both of them contemplated having children sure to do amazing things but also therefore likely to bring suffering and troubles to their mothers. It would take much

courage and vision to be Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, and Mary, mother of Jesus, the Messiah.

Silencing and speaking out. The question around who is silenced and who does the silencing are the really important questions of our times. Who silences whom and why? When Mary prophesies in the Magnificat, she promises that those in high places will be brought low and the humble will be exalted. The rich will be sent away empty and therefore the hungry will have good things. If you are in high places, that is, if you are powerful or rich or in control these are not very comforting words. These are in fact, words to be silenced. No piece of scripture has so infuriated the powerful as these beautiful verses of prophesy from Mary's lips. In fact, during the 1980's in the darkest days of Guatemala's genocidal regime, the Magnificat was banned from being read.<sup>1</sup>

Some weeks ago I gave a sermon in which I talked about governments which choose to be willfully blind. I used the example of the study from the Lancet, one of the most reputable medical journals on the planet, which revealed that more than 655,000 Iraqi civilians are estimated to have been killed since the war in Iraq began.<sup>2</sup> These estimates were obtained by using internationally accepted methodology. The Bush administration fell all over itself protesting that by their estimation no more than 30,000 had died. However, when pressed, the White House had to admit that as policy, they have decided not to count the civilian dead. You do not count what you don't want counted. They do not want to know.

This is unfortunately, what our Canadian government has decided to do with the issues that Canadian women have to deal with. All of those groups that bring concerns about the oppression, the systemic impoverishment, the abuse of women have effectively been silenced in recent weeks. Our current government does not want to know. In fact, as policy, the decree from on high is that no women's group that has the word "equality" in its mandate or mission statement can receive a government grant of any kind. We have never observed a more fearful regime so intent on silencing the voices of those who experience repression. I take that back. Perhaps during the FLQ crisis, the state was a little more repressive. We do not yet have the imposition of martial law-just the slow death of any institutions that empower those of lesser stature.

In my work as a minister I have made use of the Status of Women's office many times. I have consulted them when dealing with situations of domestic violence. I have consulted them when trying to initiate or participate in programs in which I need facts, connections and information about other organizations that do work around family issues and women's concerns. One of the things that the Status of Women's offices do very well is gather statistics and do studies about the conditions women must still endure in Canada. For example, women still outnumber men nine to one as victims of assault by a spouse or partner. Between 1977 and 1996 three times as many women were killed by their spouses as were men killed by their spouses. Another statistic you may not know – girls are at the greatest risk of sexual assault by a family member or "family friend" and they are more likely to be assaulted between the ages of 12 and 15 years of age. So much for all the time, energy and hype we expend on worrying about "stranger danger."<sup>4</sup> In

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<sup>4</sup> Status of Women, "Annual Remembrance Focuses on Sexual Violence Against Women," December 5, 2006, 12:25, (News Release).

2004, 886 sexual offences were reported to police in Nova Scotia. The vast majority of them are against women and girls. Only 8% of sexual assaults in Canada are ever reported to police.<sup>56</sup>

The Status of Women's councils across Canada have, of late, begun gathering statistics on women and poverty. This, I believe, is probably their real crime in the eyes of the Conservative government. Women still face big economic challenges. For example, women make 71 cents to every male counterpart's dollar. Women still bear the major responsibilities of child care and therefore are more likely to be adversely affected economically by the lack of child care spaces. These are all issues that the Status of Women has tried to raise awareness about.

We have known for a long time that single mothers often live in poverty. What has lately become more recognized, particularly by the Status of Women Councils, and what no one wants to face is that the fastest growing group of women living in poverty are senior women who are under-pensioned. As the boomers retire in masses this has become a really important economic issue. It is also clearly a justice issue and an issue of faith for those of us who call ourselves Christians. Many more women who have had inadequate "official" incomes and therefore will have inadequate pensions and who find themselves suddenly single will be living in dire poverty in the years to come. Many women of my mother's age, plus or minus ten years, were told that it was important and even valuable to stay home and look after the children and the house. It was indeed valuable work and still is. Women were also told that it was their proper place, 'part of God's design.' However, I can tell you that the very first thing that every woman whom I have given pastoral care to after their husband has left them, (almost always for a younger model), has heard from their husband's lawyer is some variation of "You stayed home for all those years and didn't contribute anything to the family income. You don't deserve half, despite what the law says." Many of these women are left with poor education, little work experience and half of a small pension. This looming economic social problem is the real fear of the Conservative government. They do not want to know about these things. They do not want to collect this kind of information and they certainly do not want a bunch of uppity, empowered educated women collecting these kind of facts. Remember, no one really wants a body count of collateral damage when the war is on.

It has been the Status of women's councils that have raised questions about family violence, work place discrimination, societal systems that foster violence against women and of course, as previously stated, the reality of the economic systems that create pink ghettos. I guess they just have to go.

Let's see what else these hardened subversive Status of Women people have been about. Oh, look I have here [The Guide For Girls](#). The Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women publishes this book which enlightens our girls on such things as financially advantageous career choices given the fact that statistically many of them will be sole bread winners. The book talks about healthy body image, healthy relationships. It includes a directory of services, a guide to building self esteem, coping with bullying and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Health Canada, "Violence Against Women," [http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/pubs/women-femmes/violence\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/pubs/women-femmes/violence_e.html)

building friendships. The book provides advice about violence prevention. This amazing guide is attractive, easy to read and accessible. Why is the government so worried about this work that Status of Women groups are doing?

Conservative governments throughout the world behave pretty much in the same way. In September the multicultural spokesman, Andrew Robb, of the Australian government spoke to a gathering of Muslim Imams. "Terrorism is your problem, you sort it out!" he said.<sup>7</sup> I do not agree with Andrew Robb's views on Islam. However, I think that if he really believes that this is the dynamic at play then he has the clear responsibility to march right into Parliament, look at his mostly male colleagues in session and shout out, "Violence against women. It's your problem. You sort it out mates!" But of course a man like Andrew Robb would consider violence against women to be a "women's issue." A man like Andrew Robb and his mates would consider sexism, discrimination against women and systemic oppression to be a women's concern which really doesn't have much to do with him-or his "mates."

I have to state categorically here that I believe most men to be good. In fact, I myself live with three very good, decent wonderful Christian men. It is the responsibility of all good, decent wonderful men to speak out against violence. The stark reality is that men who abuse women, men who are violent to women do not listen to women. They would, likely, listen to other men, particularly men they admired and respected. Many of you are admired and respected. The self silencing of good men hurts all of us. It will take a great deal of courage for good men to speak out. However, if there is ever to be peace in the world, it will need to happen soon.

All of us need to examine what we say and do to one another if there is ever to be peace and if ever there is to be equality among the genders. Sexism can be so internalized that women practice it against each other. For example, it is not the men who give me hard time about my right to be in the pulpit or my right to be in ministry. It is usually other women. Often older women. This is how sexism inspires us to diminish and even dehumanize each other. This is how internalized sexism contributes to the absence of peace in our own church structures.

When Carl and I were twenty eight years of age, we were asked to lead a youth group in the United Church in Waverly. Rev. Bill Gibson asked us. We had no experience or training but we were game so we agreed. The first thing we decided we would do was have a teen sleep over in the church basement. Another couple worked with us. The first thing we discovered was that "teen sleepover" is an oxymoron. There is no sleep to be had by teens or anyone else at a teen sleepover. We had one girl, whom we shall call Karen, who was a handful. She was loud, erratic and needed a lot of attention. She came from a good family who cared about her. However, I had the sense that they were at their wit's end in terms of how to deal with her. I think they hoped that connecting with a church youth group would help her. She had a few friends in the group who tried to encourage her to join in with the board games and activities that night. She was very disruptive throughout the night and attempted at one point to run out with the purse of the other woman who was helping us. I continued with the youth group but the

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<sup>7</sup> Lincoln Wright, *The Herald Sun*, September 17, 2006.  
<http://www.news.com.au/heraldsun/story/0,,20425347-661,00.html>

other adults bowed out after that night. Karen never came back and to be truthful my main response was one of relief. The other youth members kept me apprised of her progress, or lack thereof. She continued to get into trouble and eventually ran away from home. Karen became involved in the prostitution ring that was being run from Nova Scotia through through Montreal and into Ontario. She was murdered in Montreal at the age of 15. One day, years later, I was working in the lab and listening to the CBC radio as I always did. I was interested in an interview the CBC host was doing with a RCMP officer who was involved in breaking up the prostitution ring between Nova Scotia and Ontario. He had the responsibility of working with the safe houses for the girls and often found that they kept in touch with him afterward. He had some hard things to say about churches. I perked up my ears. And then he told a story that devastated me. He said that one of the young women had been smoking a cigarette on some church steps in Montreal when a well dressed church man said to another well dressed man from the church, "Someone get that whore off the church steps before the good church people come." She was crushed. She called the RCMP officer distraught and crying. He calmed her down the best he could he said, the anger rising in his voice, but what bothered him was that she was murdered that night. That was the last thing she heard from the so called "civilized world" before she died. *Someone get that whore off the church steps before the good church people come.* It was Karen he was talking about. I wept.

Karen, troubled young woman that she was, experienced the worst sort of dehumanization that sexism has to offer. The only one who treated her as a human being on the last day of her life was the man who theoretically employed by the state to arrest her. Dehumanization is what we do to women in general, but women on the fringes like sex trade workers, aboriginal women, immigrant women, women of colour and women with disabilities all experience it intensely. Women with disabilities, for example, are four times more likely to be assaulted throughout their lifetime than other women. These women are considered vulnerable and therefore fair game by predators and not quite human by those who should be their protectors.

This Sunday, the Sunday in Advent dedicated to peace, all across Canada the 14 women who are murdered at L'Ecole Polytechnique will be remembered, their voices permanently silenced by someone who hated them because they were women. I invite you as their names are read to listen carefully and think about who these daughters and sisters were and what kind of contribution they would have made to society as engineers, should they have been allowed to graduate.

When will women's voices be unsilenced? Mary the pregnant mother of Jesus, prophesies about the day that the low will be lifted up. Liberation is encompassed in her words, "God 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." These are the promises of God. Conservative governments –be wary.

**The names of the Fourteen women are:**

Genevieve Bergeron, age 21, civil engineering student

Helene Colgan, age 23, mechanical engineering student

Nathalie Croteau, age 23, mechanical engineering student

Barbara Daigneault: age 22, mechanical engineering student

Anne-Marie Edward: age 21, chemical engineering student

Maud Haviernick: age 29, graduate in environmental design

Barbara Maria Klucznik: age 21, engineering materials student

Maryse Laganiere: age 25, worked at Polytechnique

Maryse Leclair: age 23, engineering materials student

Anne-Marie Lemay, age 22, mechanical engineering student

Sonia Pelletier: age 28, to graduate on Dec. 7, 1989 as a mechanical engineer

Michele Richard: age 21, engineering materials student

Annie St-Arneault: age 23, mechanical engineering student

Annie Turcotte: age 21, engineering materials student

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<sup>1</sup> *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998) p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> Burnham, Shannon Doocy, Elizabeth Dzung, Riyadh Lafta, Les Roberts, "The Human Cost of the War in Iraq," *The Lancet*, October, 2006.