

The Girl Who Lived
Summer Saints Sermon Series: Malala Yousafzai (July 12, 2020)
Friendship Presbyterian Church

*And Mary said,
"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." (Luke 1:46-55, NRSV)*

Those of you who are familiar with the Harry Potter stories will remember that young Harry was famous in the wizarding world before he even found out who and what he was. As an infant, an attempt was made on his life by the Dark Lord Voldemort on account of a prophecy which told of a boy who would grow up to have the power to put an end to his tyranny. A Death Curse – which no one had ever survived – was hurled at the young Harry, but it rebounded on the Dark Lord and destroyed his physical form for many years.

In time, Harry would come to learn this reason for his fame ... to learn how it was that he survived the attack and the truth about the mysterious scar left on his forehead. His unlikely story would in time become the great call on his life, to resist the Powers of Death, for he was "the Boy Who Lived."

Today our Summer Saint is the only one of our seven who is currently living, and hopefully for a long, long time to come! It is the young Pakistani activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai, who is 23 years old today. She is the real-life "Girl Who Lived," having survived being shot in the head by a Taliban militant who specifically targeted her for her open activism of education for girls, in opposition to the Taliban's

repressive policies. She was only 15 years old at the time, though she had been actively blogging and speaking out for years before then!

Malala was born on July 12, 1997, in Mingora, Pakistan, in what is known as the Swat Valley. She is the daughter of Ziauddin and Tor Pekai Yousafzai and has two younger brothers. Welcoming a baby *girl* into a family in Pakistan is not always cause for celebration, but *her* father was determined to give her every opportunity a boy would have. He was (and still is) a passionate advocate for education himself, and at the time ran a girl's school in the city. He later told her stories of how little Malala would toddle into classes even before she could talk and acted as if she were the teacher!

In 2007, when she was ten years old, the situation in the Swat Valley rapidly changed for her family and community. The Taliban began to exert control over the region and quickly became the dominant force throughout much of northwestern Pakistan. And for young Malala, this changed everything, for the extremists banned many things — like owning a television or playing music — and enforced harsh punishments for those who defied their orders. And they decreed that girls could no longer go to school and set about destroying hundreds of them.

But Malala refused to accept that. In early 2009, at the age of 11(!), Malala started to blog anonymously on the Urdu language site of the BBC. Using the name “Gul Makai,” she wrote about life in the Swat Valley under the harsh and unjust rule of the Taliban, and about her passionate desire to attend school. Fortunately, after a counter-offensive by the Pakistani army, the ban on girls' schooling was lifted after several months, though with restrictions.

Her voice grew louder and bolder, and soon, she and her father had become known throughout Pakistan for their determination to give all Pakistani girls access to a free quality education. Her activism resulted in her being nominated by Desmond Tutu for the International Children's Peace Prize in 2011, and that same year, she was awarded Pakistan's National Youth Peace Prize. But not everyone supported and welcomed her campaign to bring about such fundamental structural change. Death threats against her and her father were common.

Then one day, she was seated on a bus heading home after an exam in October 2012. Malala — now 15 years old — was talking with her friends about schoolwork. But then the bus was stopped by two well-armed members of the Taliban. Boarding it, one of them asked for Malala by name, and fired three shots at her. One of the bullets entered and exited her head and lodged in her shoulder. She was critically wounded.

She woke up 10 days later in an ICU in Birmingham, England, and was told about the attack — and that people around the world were praying for her recovery. Though she would require multiple surgeries, including repair of a facial nerve to fix the paralyzed left side of her face, she had suffered no major brain damage. In March 2013, after

several months of treatment and therapy, she was able to begin attending school in Birmingham, her new adopted home.

Malala knew that she was the Girl Who Lived, and her living had only confirmed her purpose. Looking back on this attempt on her life and her slow but sure recovery, she reflected, "It was then I knew I had a choice: I could live a quiet life, or I could make the most of this new life I had been given. I determined to continue my fight until every girl could go to school."

After the shooting, her incredible recovery and return to school resulted in a global outpouring of support. On July 12, 2013, her 16th birthday, Malala visited New York and spoke at the United Nations. Later that year, she published her first book, an autobiography entitled "I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban." On October 10 of the same year, in acknowledgement of her work, the European Parliament awarded Malala the prestigious Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

In 2014, with her father, she co-founded the Malala Fund, a charitable organization dedicated to giving every girl an opportunity to achieve a future of her own choosing. Through its work, she traveled to Jordan to meet Syrian refugees, to Kenya to meet young female students, and finally to northern Nigeria for her 17th birthday. There, she spoke out in support of the abducted girls who were kidnapped earlier that year by Boko Haram, a terrorist group which, like the Taliban, tries to stop girls from going to school.

And then, in October 2014, Malala, along with Indian children's rights activist Kailash Satyarthi, was named a Nobel Peace Prize winner. At age 17, she became the youngest person ever to receive this prize. Accepting the award, Malala reaffirmed that "This award is not just for me. It is for those forgotten children who want education. It is for those frightened children who want peace. It is for those voiceless children who want change."

Still residing today in Birmingham and having just last month graduated from Oxford, Malala remains a fierce proponent of education as a fundamental social and economic right. There is no telling what she will yet achieve.

My first introduction to Malala Yousafzai was the same as for many Americans: When on October 8, 2013 – a year after she was shot – Malala, at the age of 16, visited The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, her first major late night appearance. She was there as a guest to promote her new book, *I am Malala*. On the program they discussed the attempt on her life, human rights, and women's education. She left Jon Stewart speechless when she described her own inner dialogue after learning that the Taliban wanted her dead, saying:

“I started thinking about that, and I used to think that the Talib would come, and he would just kill me. But then I said, 'If he comes, what would you do Malala?' then I would reply to myself, 'Malala, just take a shoe and hit him.' But then I said, 'If you hit a Talib with your shoe, then there would be no difference between you and the Talib. You must not treat others with cruelty, and that much harshly, you must fight others, but through peace and through dialogue and through education.' Then I said I will tell him how important education is and that 'I even want education for your children as well.' And I will tell him, 'That's what I want to tell you, now do what you want.’”

Visibly moved by her words, Stewart ended the conversation saying, “I am humbled to speak with you.”

He would again have her as a guest on the show after the 2015 Charleston Church Shooting, in which he started the show explaining that he would tell no jokes. Referring to Malala, he said, "Our guest is an incredible person who suffered unspeakable violence by extremists, and her perseverance and determination through that to continue on is an incredible inspiration, and to be quite honest with you, I don't think there's anyone else in the world I would rather talk to tonight than Malala, so that's what we'll do ...”

As I thought about how to relate her story to the biblical witness, my first thought was of another bold, courageous teenage girl who would change the world. In our passage from Luke today, we are offered an often forgotten and surprising glimpse of Mary. She has just been visited by the angel Gabriel and told the astonishing news that she would be the mother of the Messiah, the Son of God, and now she goes with haste into the hill country to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth is a much, much older woman who earlier received news of her own that was just as surprising and is now herself six months pregnant!

When Mary greets her cousin, the unborn child inside Elizabeth (who would grow up to be John the Baptist) leaps for joy, causing her to rejoice in what God was now doing in her, and in and through the young Mary. This mutual sharing then inspires Mary to break into an exultant song of God’s love and power, and of God’s determination to lift up those whom the world for far too long had pushed down. Today, we call it the *Magnificat*. It is a song of God’s ultimate victory over injustice ... It is a song of subversive wisdom ... It is a song of how the world is about to turn ... all from the lips of a teenage girl.

Knowing that this story is part of sacred scripture, read solemnly moments ago as the “Gospel of the Lord,” may keep us from fully appreciating just how wild and absurd the whole scene is. The coming of the Messiah who will redeem Israel is anticipated and proclaimed, but *not* by archangels or high priests or emperors or even ordained preachers. Rather, it’s two marginalized women—one young, poor, and unwed, the

other far beyond the age to conceive—who meet up in the hill country of Judea to celebrate (and possibly commiserate about) their miraculous pregnancies. A baby leaps in the womb. Blessings are shared. Astonishment is expressed. Songs are sung.

Mary's song, her Magnificat, gives voice to this subversive incarnation that she and Elizabeth embody. Indeed, the fact that *Mary* sings these words is itself odd and subversive! This young, unwed woman proclaims one of the most important prophetic words in all Scripture. She gives voice to a song for the ages, a song that invites us beyond our realistic expectations and our numb imaginations. She herself seems amazed at what has happened, and the rest of her song announces the larger implications of the upside-down world God has inaugurated: "*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*" (vv.51b-53).

And notice that she proclaims this promised, topsy-turvy future as an already-accomplished fact—possibly because that future can already be glimpsed in God's choice of *her* as the bearer of the Messiah. The song proclaims the reality and promise that she embodies. Indeed, it ironically foresees the end of the very social structures that ground Mary's own worth in her ability to bear a son.

This song on her lips was the manifesto that propelled her, from that day, into the joy and pain of her calling, and would become the lullaby which stirred her own *son's* passion, and would define his kingdom, and her place of dignity and honor within it. In the days which will follow, she will endure hardship, but empowered by the song, she will hope, unflinchingly, for that day when God turns the world around. Hers is a raw faith, testifying to the radical, unpredictable, and ultimate triumph of the gospel.

Mary and Malala are sisters in spirit! For both, their courage and determination is rooted in a deep faith in God's justice and in the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings as God's children. And in this faith, they are unstoppable.

In a speech before the United Nations General Assembly in June 2013, eight months after the attempt on her life, young Malala spoke these words:

"Dear friends, on October 9, 2012, the Taliban shot me on the left side of my forehead. They shot my friends, too. They thought that the bullets would silence us, but they failed. And out of that silence came thousands of voices. The terrorists thought they would change my aims and stop my ambitions. But nothing changed in my life except this: weakness, fear, and hopelessness died. Strength, power, and courage were born. I am the same Malala. My ambitions are the same. My hopes are the same. And my dreams are the same ..."

And thank God they are! Amen.