Jia Tolentino is a staff writer with the New Yorker, former editor of the feminist site Jezebel, and author of “Trick Mirror: Reflections On Self-Delusion.” She is also five years younger than me, if you can believe it. Listening to an interview with her a few weeks ago led me to the humbling realization that I have, in my mid-thirties, reached the point where I am frequently learning from people I could have coached or babysat for or baptized at some point earlier in life.

Jia is known for tackling complex cultural issues in her writing, reflecting critically on the role of social media in her life and that of her fellow millennials, how feminism has changed over the decades, and analyzing emerging movements like #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and teens organizing against gun violence in schools. Despite her obvious radical leanings, most of her childhood was spent in one of the nation’s largest evangelical Churches in Houston, Texas. She not only worshipped there, but went to school there – “there” being a massive, multi-block compound with a worship space that held 6,500 people. Easter took place at the Toyota Center, home to Houston’s professional basketball team. She remembers watching “services” from a stadium seat on a massive big screen TV, and writing her sins on small sheets of paper during elementary school Chapel and then, electronic music blaring and colored lights flashing, nailing them to a cross and crying over her shortcomings. It was, you could say, a “total experience.”

But whereas most people begin to question their faith in their late teens or young adulthood, Jia’s started to break down in middle school. It wasn’t the influence of popular culture that led her to question fundamentalist Christianity. It wasn’t learning about science. It wasn’t reading classical literature. It was the Bible. Jia was deeply moved by her experience of the Church - so moved that she wanted to learn more about this Jesus person and his life, about the Good News he proclaimed and the scripture at the heart of the faith. But when she started reading the Bible, she couldn’t square the God she met there – the stories she found there – with the stories her Church was telling and the values they espoused. For example, her childhood Church upheld the prosperity Gospel, which essentially says God wants us to be rich. Material
wealth is a blessing and poverty a sign of one’s spiritual inadequacy. But then she read passages of the Bible she’d never heard before, and in them Jesus said things like, “Blessed are the poor.” He told parables in which it was the rich and powerful who struggled most to draw closer to God. And the whole of the Hebrew scriptures seems to counter the idea that prosperity was akin to divine favor. She would read the Gospels, astounded, and think, “these are books about economic redistribution and helping the hungry and the sick.”

Hearing this, all I could think was, “Gosh, she sounds like Mary.” Mary – another young woman deeply moved by God’s concern for those traditionally left out of the social order. The God who scatters the proud. Who brings down the powerful. The God who lifts up the lowly, and fills the hungry with good things. Mary - another young woman whose sense of innocence and security in the world and whose place within her own family and community was shaken by Jesus and the Good News he brought into the world with him. Mary – another young woman – much younger than Jia, probably – entrusted with dangerous truths that challenged the social order, discomforted those closest to her, and put her very standing in society in question.

After her life-changing conversation with Gabriel, Mary rushed to the home of her relative, Elizabeth, herself pregnant with the John the Baptist. Like so many women before her and since who found themselves with an unplanned pregnancy, who found themselves caught up in something alarming they couldn’t quite understand, who found themselves overwhelmed and uncertain, she sought out a trusted friend, and Elizabeth becomes the first person with whom she shares her news. Or at least with whom she plans to. Elizabeth and her unborn child beat her to the punch, recognizing the miracle that has taken place in Mary’s life, her heart, her body, before she can even get the words out. So before she ever says out loud, “I’m pregnant,” or “Do you believe in Angels?” or “Elizabeth, you are never going to believe what just happened,” she says instead, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” I wonder if Mary wasn’t sure what to make of Gabriel’s visit until she was finally able to share it with Elizabeth. If she ran there trying to decide whether what had just happened to her was the best thing ever or the worst, and it was only when someone else could see and name for her that this was better than best that she could let herself believe it, too.

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Mary’s experience, and the beautiful words she strings together in today’s Gospel, seem to echo the Song of Hannah found in the First Book of Samuel. Upon Hannah’s unexpected conception, her “heart rejoices in the Lord” and she “delights in God’s deliverance.” Hannah affirms God as the one who “raises up the poor from the dust” and “lifts the needy from the ash heap.” It’s likely Hannah’s song had become familiar in the Jewish tradition in which Mary was raised – her synagogue probably smaller in scale than a compound in Houston - like the Magnificat is, today, so that in a moment of disruption and dis-ease it was already on the tip of her tongue, like the Serenity Prayer for people in recovery, the Lord’s Prayer for most of us Christians, the Rosary for Catholics, or whatever psalm or poem or mantra or plea you’ve worn smooth with repetition. Maybe this was not only a familiar prayer but a beloved one. One that had gotten her through hard times before. One she knew she could rely on.

It makes a lot of sense that a woman who found herself in a bind – women rarely having access throughout history to an unbiased experience of worldly justice and mercy – would appreciate this song. If we sing it from the perspective of the downtrodden, which is surely how Many and Hannah did, it is inspiring. Hopeful. Courageous. But singing it at Christ Church in Los Altos in 2019, we might hear it a little differently. We might be tempted to focus on the God who looks with favor on our lowliness, who does great things in our lives. A God who is merciful and dependable and holy. We might even find ways to give thanks for the God who shows strength and scatters the proud (perhaps we know something of this God already), who fills the hungry with good things, and who helps those faithful in service. But we might be tempted to ignore or minimize those parts about the powerful being brought down from their thrones and the rich sent away empty.

We would not be the first. Though the Episcopal Church has never embraced the Prosperity Gospel, I’m sure Jia pastor never focused much on this part of the Magnificat, either. But as she discovered in reading the Bible for herself, and as many of us who have done the same cannot deny, passages like this are all over the Bible. They are not the exception but the rule. It seems that God’s sense of what is important, valuable, worthy of our toil and our pride, is very different from what society through the ages has celebrated.

I have heard preachers say that passages like this are “bad news” for people like us. I know what they mean – they obviously challenge the very framework of systems that seem,
objectively, to benefit those who already have wealth, health, homes in safe neighborhoods, even vacation homes in safe neighborhoods, and so on. But I could not disagree more. The Magnificat – all of it - is Good News, for all of us and everyone. It is challenging news, for sure, but it is Good News nonetheless. The challenge of marriage or parenthood or good work does not make it any less good.

I once had a mentor – himself a pretty radical person and preacher – who frequently talked about how glad he was for the conservative nature of the Church. I once asked him what he meant by this and he mused about how he’d always seen the institutional Church – ours, the Roman one, the orthodox one, however you want to understand this – as, essentially, a conservative system. That is, it is risk and change averse, focused – like most organizations, societies, even the human body – primarily on its preservation and the maintenance of the status quo. Let me be clear that in using the word conservative I am not invoking a political ideology. Rather, the conservative impulse is one that seeks to, essentially, conserve, and in and of itself this is a good, life-giving, generative energy.

But the Gospel, my mentor explained, is something else entirely. The Good News the Church has carried, held, passed down throughout the ages, is like a fire always just on the edge of burning itself out. The Gospel is all about change. It is all about the new thing, the next thing, the horizon. Without the stability of the container provided by the Church, the Gospel might have petered out under its own disorganized, spirit-led enthusiasm long ago. But thanks to a counter-energy amongst the disciples – this conservative impulse – which gave rise to the Church’s structures and stability, generations have been able to encounter this story anew, fresh, burning brightly.

Of course, this is an abstraction. Both the Church and the Gospel are carried by people – lived by people - and often the same people – but it illustrates a dynamic tension: two contradictory impulses, both of which are necessary for the life of our faith. Without the Gospel, the Church becomes stagnant and cold. Without the Church, the Gospel becomes unmoored and easily exploited. We see this tension in our liturgy, which we’re exploring in our weekly forum and through the Parish Survey. Here we are: a Church that is forward thinking and innovative, part of a tradition that prides itself on being a place where you “don’t have to leave your brain at the door” and where questions are as if not more welcome than answers, proud to follow a
pattern of worship that dates back to the second century. If we want to see the conservative impulse at work, all we have to do is change something in that pattern.

This is funny because it is so familiar, and let me be clear – it is also not bad. It is how we maintain the integrity of our worship – how we keep the flame burning bright – and I, too, am entirely caught up in this same tension. A few years ago at our 10:15 a.m. service, we started occasionally singing the Nicene Creed instead of saying it and now go back and forth. Some people love it and some people don’t. More recently, we changed the words of the doxology to a more inclusive language version. Some people love it and some people don’t. But the Book of Common Prayer itself includes two authorized translations of the Lord’s Prayer, one more traditional and one more contemporary (both of which are, of course, translations of the original Greek and innovations on earlier English translations of the same, but let’s not trouble ourselves too much with that) and do you know how many times we have used the more contemporary version of the Lord’s Prayer since I started serving here? Zero. Why? Because I don’t like it. It’s a bridge too far for my conservative impulse. That doesn’t mean we’ll never use it. And it’s not a particularly compelling theological defense. But it’s the truth.

We also see this tension between maintenance and growth, tradition and innovation, orthodoxy and emergence, at play within ourselves, constantly. Esther Perel is a couples and family therapist in New York famous for her work on “Erotic Intelligence,” which is not so much concerned with sex or sexuality as it is with vitality: the felt-sense of our quality of aliveness, and how this manifests in our lives. While widely known for her books, podcast, and TED talks, she is also a keen observer of the human condition. She speaks five languages and was raised, a refugee, by Holocaust survivors in Belgium. She became curious about what made for fullness of life growing up around so many people whose vitality had been stolen.

Trained in systems therapy, she is keenly aware that, in her words, “every living organism straddles stability and change — in nature, in companies, in societies — if you change all the time, you go chaotic. You dysregulate … and you may dissolve, disintegrate. If you don’t change at all, you fossilize, you go stale, and you may also disintegrate.”3 These competing needs for stability and change grow into a fundamental tension at the heart of so many of our

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experiences of ourselves, of life, of the Church, of faith, and how we navigate and tolerate and continue to grow in light of them is the story of our lives.

“My soul magnifies the Lord,” Mary says, giving herself over, courageously and prophetically, to an unpredictable God, whose story – along with Hannah’s – has been passed down throughout the generations that they and we might say the same and mean it. The Church needs the Gospel and the Gospel needs the Church if any of us, in any time or place, are to continue encountering the God who called to Hannah, and Mary, and Jia, and each of us, over and over again, leading us to work for change, leading us to work for stability, each in our own unique way, as we, too, affirm, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Amen.