



A Post Tenebras Lux Sunday Sermon...

The Magnificat: Mary's Song Luke 1:46-55

Our Old Testament reading this morning is from 1 Samuel 2:1. If you're using one of the pew Bibles that's page 225.

^{ESV} **1 Samuel 2:1**...And Hannah prayed and said,
"My heart exults in the LORD;
 my strength is exalted in the LORD.
My mouth derides my enemies,
 because I rejoice in your salvation.
² "There is none holy like the LORD;
 there is none besides you;
 there is no rock like our God.
³ Talk no more so very proudly,
 let not arrogance come from your mouth;
 for the LORD is a God of knowledge,
 and by him actions are weighed.
⁴ The bows of the mighty are broken,
 but the feeble bind on strength.
⁵ Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
 but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger.
The barren has borne seven,
 but she who has many children is forlorn.
⁶ The LORD kills and brings to life;
 he brings down to Sheol and raises up.
⁷ The LORD makes poor and makes rich;
 he brings low and he exalts.
⁸ He raises up the poor from the dust;
 he lifts the needy from the ash heap
 to make them sit with princes

and inherit a seat of honor.
For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's,
and on them he has set the world.
⁹ "He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness,
for not by might shall a man prevail.
¹⁰ The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces;
against them he will thunder in heaven.
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king
and exalt the power of his anointed."

Our New Testament reading and our principal text this morning is Luke 1:46. If you're using one of the pew Bibles that's page 856.

^{ESV} **Luke 1:46**...And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

This is the Word of God.

Father, we come to you this morning confessing to you our great need. Father we need and we desire that the Holy Spirit come now and take the things of Christ and make them real to our hearts...to come and take the written word and as its true author and therefore its infallible teacher to instruct us in the truth of your Son. Open the book we pray to see what you have accomplished on our behalf, in Christ, in whose name, we pray, Amen.

Their names were Woody and Mary. They were Wycliffe missionaries assigned to do translation work in Niamey, Niger in northwest Africa. They were bright, articulate, thirty-something's at the end of their first term and at the end of their rope.

They were lonely, sick, tired, hot, and discouraged.

Mary had injured her back in a car accident and had been confined to her bed for almost a month. Woody worked hard to take care of her but the relentless pain in her back and the unbearable heat made that difficult. Even though it was December, it was 125 degrees in the shade outside and only a few degrees cooler inside the little concrete blockhouse where they lived with their two children. They had no air conditioner and even if they had they could not have afforded the electricity it took to run it.

Mary's injury caused even the slightest movement to send sharp pains radiating down her legs...and that began a relentless series of slow rolling spasms that caused her body to draw up in a knot and made her want to scream. It was a little like being in labor...except there were no breaks and the pain went on day after day and week after week. Everything hurt and hurt terribly. But Woody

was there and was ever so gentle as he fed her, bathed her, changed her sheets and lovingly handled the less delicate duties. He did his best to keep her medicated and he did his best to keep her cool. Woody spent long hours sitting and talking to her, reading to her, swabbing her with cool washrags trying to distract her from the unrelenting pain and the unrelenting heat.

Then the week before Christmas, as if things could not get any worse, Woody and both kids contracted malaria. Fevered and desperately sick himself, Woody dragged three small beds into the same room where Mary was and started up their own hospital in which he was both doctor, patient, chaplain, nurse, cook, orderly and chief pot scrubber.

On Christmas Eve, they hit rock bottom.

Just as darkness began to settle on Niamey, they could hear a Muslim cleric over the loudspeaker of a distant minaret calling Muslims to evening prayer. The woeful sound of his voice and the darkness associated with it just about did them all in. They were sick, lonely, hot, and discouraged. They were ten thousand miles away from their family and they hadn't had either the strength or the opportunity to get ready for Christmas.

They lay there in the stifling heat...in the dark, so disheartened that they decided not to turn on the lights for fear of having to see the disappointment in each other's faces when all of a sudden they thought they heard Christmas carolers far away singing **"Joy to the World, the Lord has Come."**

Now, I can tell you, even with my own limited experience of the place that is not something you hear very often in Muslim North Africa.

Woody wondered for a moment if his fever had come back up and might be causing him to hallucinate. But the sound of the carolers kept coming closer and closer and pretty soon they sounded like maybe they were standing at the gate just outside their house. And then, suddenly, someone knocked on their front door.

Woody got up and went over and opened the door and there on their stoop was every Wycliffe missionary they knew in Niamey along with just about every other Christian worker from every other mission agency in the city. They were carrying dishes of carefully prepared food and they were carrying presents for the kids and box fans and someone had a guitar and the whole group began to sing Christmas carols and someone read the Christmas narrative out of Luke's gospel and they worshipped together and were comforted.

And you know what? Unless I miss my guess, you were comforted just now hearing me relate that story to you even though you don't know Woody and Mary from Adam and even though it has been eleven or twelve years since it actually happened. You see there is something intrinsically comforting in the story and message of Christmas. Now...it's not some sort of artificial, subjective, sentimental kind of comfort where we simply think back on and reminisce over the good old days. No, it's more than that. It is an objective, nitty-gritty, down to earth kind of story that speaks peace to our souls even in the midst of the worst kind of sin, loneliness and despair.

You see in the Christmas story we're reminded again and again of what God has done for us. We are reminded that he condescended to save his children by sending the Lord Jesus into the world to redeem us from our sin, and he did that

not because of anything good in us...not because we deserved his mercy or kindness. No, he did that for us when we were altogether helpless. He did that for us when we were what the Apostle Paul calls dead in our trespasses and sin. He did that for us not because we were any sort of treasure but rather because he had promised to do so, and because in doing so he could reflect his great covenantal mercy and kindness.

Is it any wonder then that Christians love Christmas and the songs of Christmas? We love to sing about God's extraordinary wisdom and kindness in the incarnation. We love to lift up his name, to praise him with the fruit of our lips, to magnify both his attributes and his kindnesses towards us. And we love to do that with one great, unified voice in uplifted song.

I suppose then that it ought not to surprise us very much then that the Holy Spirit has included three such hymns of praise in the opening chapters of the Gospel According to Luke.¹ These three hymns are known historically as the "**infancy hymns.**" Now the three hymns recorded in the early chapters of Luke were not originally sung; rather, they were spoken and spoken by three different characters in the Christmas story: the Virgin Mary, Zechariah the father of John the Baptist, and Simeon, an unknown prophet.

It's important to note too that the hymns there are not hymns in the modern sense of the word. That is, they're...they're not set to music in the text and they don't...they don't rhyme like most modern hymns do. Still, they *are* hymns or psalms in the ancient and biblical sense. That is, they have an internal rhythm and structure, a sort of parallelism that shows they are intended to be poetic. As a result, they lend themselves to singing. So, taking note of their structure and

their content, the Western Church has more or less recognized them for what they are, and has set them to music, and has often incorporated them into its worship many times over the last fourteen or fifteen hundred years. In fact, the church has used these three hymns in the opening part of Luke so many times in the life of its worship that the three hymns have been given their own proper names; they are called the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus*, and the *Nunc Dimittis*. The three titles are taken from early Latin translations of the three hymns and are based upon the first word or couple of words in the Latin translation of each of the three hymns.²

Last Christmas, we spent some time looking together at the *Nunc Dimittis*, the psalm or prayer of Simeon. This morning I want to turn back to the first of the three hymns, Mary's song, the *Magnificat*.

The first thing that you ought to notice is just how similar *Mary's Song* is to *Hannah's Song* that I read earlier from the book of *1st Samuel*. Both songs are the songs of women unexpectedly blessed by God with child. Many of the phrases in the two psalms are parallel. The two psalms sound alike; that is, they feel similar. That doesn't mean, of course, that Mary copied Hannah. Mary's Song has phrases in common with a number of biblical psalms and even with *Miriam's Song*, the song sung by Moses' sister after Pharaoh's army was swallowed at the Red Sea.

What that does tell us, I think, is that Mary knew the great stories of the Bible, and she knew them by heart. I think it means that God's great acts of salvation and deliverance were such an integral part in her life and thought that whenever she prayed what came out of her mouth sounded very much like the Bible itself.

What that means is that even the rhythm and meter of her prayer and worship sounded something like Hannah's song, or Miriam's song, or the one of the psalms of David. Take for example the first two verses of the Magnificat, verses 46 and 47.

^{ESV} **Luke 1:46...**"My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,"

When you first look at it, it sounds like Mary is saying two different things. It sounds like she is saying her soul does one thing and her spirit does something else, and then, of course, you realize her song is Hebrew poetry written in a sort of parallel structure where the author strings together different phrases that all really mean the same thing.

Take for example the opening verse of Psalm 1...

^{ESV} **Psalm 1:1...**Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

You see, the three parallel phrases in that verse all basically mean the same thing. The verse is not really trying to distinguish between walking, standing, and sitting. Rather, it is a poetic way, a Hebrew way, of focusing on all the various aspects of living and together the three phrases mean something like this:
"Blessed is the man who gives no part of his life over to sinful unbelief and disobedience."

So when Mary says...

^{ESV} **Luke 1:46**... "My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,"

...what she means is that she rejoices in and glorifies God with her whole, undivided being. She is saying in a poetic way that all she is, all that she ever will be or hopes to be praises God for his great salvation. Later on Catholic dogma would argue that Mary was born sinless and remained sinless throughout her life. But they didn't get that idea from the biblical text...they certainly didn't get it from Mary. She certainly never thought of herself as sinless. She knew she needed a Savior and she rejoiced in God's salvation. Her praise is the praise of a heart overflowing with gratitude...gratitude both for all that God had done and was yet to do for her.

I wonder if you're like me and that seems a bit foreign this morning.

I wonder if you're like me and that sort of thinking has just slid off into a sea of self-centeredness where just about every thought centers on you and your dreams and/or problems and how others are treating you.

I wonder if you're like me and the kind of praise that Mary offers here is maybe something you used to feel...perhaps...a long, long time ago.

I wonder if you're like me and it's been awhile since the genuine beauty of all that God has accomplished on your behalf in Christ has overwhelmed your soul.

I wonder if you're like me and it's been awhile since the weight of your sin pressed down on your heart and soul so heavy that it made it hard to breathe or even think.

I wonder if you're like me and it's been a while since you remembered the unspeakable joy you felt when you realized, truly realized, for the very first time...that God has truly forgiven your sin in Christ.

Oh that we could keep in the front of our minds the great forgiveness we have in Christ...then we could sing with the great hymn writer:

*My sin—O the bliss, of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part, but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more;
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!*³

You see that's why Mary's praise is so God-centered. She remembers first what God has done for her and that causes her to think next about... about what God is really like. Look with me at verses 48 and 49 as Mary describes what God has done for her.

^{ESV} **Luke 1:48**...for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me,

Mary recalls the condescension of God in choosing her as the means to bring the Lord Jesus into the world. Think about that, God could have chosen any woman to bear the promised Messiah. He could have chosen a princess, one of the daughters of Herod, or one of any number of young, wealthy Jewish girls. But he didn't. When he condescended, he condescended all the way. He came to the

poor, to the impoverished, to the insignificant...to the forgotten. He came out of his palace in heaven to be born in a barn and not much of a barn at that...really not much more than a shed...and there in a manger...he was born of a young, insignificant, teenage Jewish girl...a girl the world took no notice of.

And Mary understood the wonder of that. Look at what she says, **“From now on all generations will call me blessed.”** And isn't that true? Isn't she the most favored of all women ever? And yet, she was blessed in spite of who she was. You see, the incarnation wasn't really about Mary. It wasn't about how grand she was, or how worthy she was. It was really about the fact that the Lord God Almighty was condescending to use one of such humble station and insignificance. And Mary knew that. That's why she hurries on to say, **“He who is mighty has done great things for me.”** Mary knew it was his work, not hers...and that flooded her soul with gratitude.

And there is a sense, I think, in which all of us can enter into the spirit of Mary's prayer. Hasn't he done great things for us as well? Hasn't he condescended to all of us here that believe? Hasn't he shown himself to be gracious and kind by coming into our lives and drawing us to himself and giving us his spirit and a place and purpose in his kingdom? He who is mighty has done great things for us in the same way he did so for Mary.

I remember back some fifty-three years ago the very first time I ever went to church. I was five or six years old and my dad drove us to East Texas on a Sunday night to see my grandfather and grandmother being baptized. They had come to faith and wanted to follow the Lord in obedience and had invited us to come to the service. I remember vividly how strange I thought the whole thing

was...how strange and how wonderful...to be in a building where people sang out loud together and prayed and took baths with their clothes on. I remember too how it changed everything. I remember how it started my parents going to church. I remember how I started going to Sunday school and how I came to love the Bible and how I began to understand all that the Lord Jesus had accomplished for me on the cross. And when I look out and see my wife and children and my grandchildren all worshipping together the very same Lord that first drew my grandfather and grandmother to himself some fifty-three years ago, I can't help but want to sing out with Mary, **"For he who is mighty has done great things for me."**

That's what Mary does but she doesn't stop there. She goes on next to consider what her great God and Savior is really like. Look at verses 49 and 50.

^{ESV} **Luke 1:49**...and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

You see as she contemplates her great God she declares that his name is holy. The point that she is making is that he is different from all others. He is not just morally superior he is actually transcendent. He is high and lifted up. He is incomparable and sovereign over all creation, and yet wonder of all wonders he displays mercy to those that fear him; his holiness leads to his mercy.⁴ And it does to from generation unto generation. Obviously, Mary is repeating the word **"generation"** purposely. Earlier she had said that from then on all generations would call her blessed. Here she says God's mercy extends from generation unto generation to all those that fear him. Now that leads to the question, **"What exactly does it mean to fear God?"** Well in one sense it certainly means what we

tend to think of when we normally use the word, “**fear.**” That is, we ought to have a healthy respect for his power and we ought to have a healthy fear of his judgment. But a more normal sense would be to “**acknowledge**” him for what he says about himself. That is, we ought to acknowledge that what he has revealed about himself is true, just as we ought to acknowledge that what he has revealed about us is true as well. She is saying that he is high and lifted up and we are lowly and of humble estate because of our sin and yet he is willing to enter into covenant with us if we rightly fear him and confess and understand the true nature of our relationship.

And to make that point even clearer, Mary describes the customary manner in which God has always dealt with mankind. Using six different action verbs, Mary explains that God has always rejected the proud and the arrogant while he has on the other hand always elevated the downtrodden and lowly. It is his customary way of dealing with sinners.

Look at verses 51-53.

^{ESV} **Luke 1:51**...He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.

I love that first phrase, “**He has shown strength with his arm.**” The idea is that he has rolled up his sleeves and gotten serious about showing his power. Dr. Magee used to say that creation was the mere finger work of God and that the cross was the real place where the bare arm of the Lord was revealed. Mary is

saying the same sort of thing about the incarnation or birth of Jesus. She is saying the incarnation of Jesus has scattered the proud and arrogant of heart like so much chaff in the wind. She is saying that in the incarnation God has toppled kings and potentates by dragging them off their thrones. But he doesn't stop there. While he has pulled down the arrogant and self-centered, he has elevated those who are of humble estate. Notice that phrase "**humble estate**" is the same phrase Mary used earlier in her song to describe herself. But God hasn't just elevated the humble, he has also filled them with good things almost certainly a reference to abiding presence of the Holy Spirit.

Mary finishes up this section of her song with that wonderful little phrase, "**he has sent the rich away empty.**" Mary is arguing that all those who base their confidence before God in their wealth or in their own intrinsic righteousness will be sent away without the spirit...sent away empty...empty, though longing to be filled.

Luke will, of course, come back to the dilemma of the rich and all those who are confident in and of themselves. He will do so over and over again in his gospel. Think about the stories that lie ahead: the rich man and his barns, the rich man and Lazarus, the rich young ruler who goes away from Jesus brokenhearted because Jesus commanded him to sell all that he had and to come and follow him. You see, Mary is foreshadowing here in her song that all those who are rich will be sent away empty, not simply because they rich but rather because they base their confidence before God in what they have or what they have been able to gain for themselves.

And why is it that the rich will be sent away? It is because acceptance before God must be based on promise, not on one's ability or self-importance.

Look at verses 54-55.

^{ESV} **Luke 1:54**...He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

You see Mary believed that the little baby in her womb would be the fulfillment of the great, covenantal promises made to Abraham. She believed that God's mercy to his people was based and would always be based upon his remembrance of the mercy that he had promised. And so it was.

Now it is important for us to remember that Mary was just about as far removed in time from Abraham as we are today from Mary. That is, just about two thousand had gone by since God had made such wonderful and dramatic promises to Abraham in Genesis 15 and Genesis 17. But Mary understood that God remembered what he had promised. She understood that he was faithful. And she understood that his faithfulness was not based upon any man or woman's righteousness but rather upon his great covenant keeping loyal love...and because she understood that she understood that God's promises to her would indeed come true.

And so it is for us this morning now some two thousand years after Mary first sang her song. We want to join her in singing her song of praise and yet there are so many things competing for our attention that we can't seem to quite get the

tune in our heads or our hearts. It's the same old dilemma we face every Christmas. We wind up so busy rushing from one place to another, so desperately trying to satisfy all the demands made on our time and our pocketbooks that we seem to forget the very thing we are trying our hardest to remember. So this week as Christmas draws close I want you to remember Woody and Mary sitting alone in the dark in bitter disappointment and discouragement being lifted out of their despair by the sound of carolers singing, "Joy to the world, the Lord has come." And as you do I pray that the Spirit of God will flood your mind with all that God has accomplished on your behalf in the birth and atoning work of the Lord Jesus. That way when you drift off to sleep next Saturday night you'll have more than visions of sugarplums dancing in your head...instead you'll drift off to sleep with those first two extraordinary lines of Mary's Song bursting in your heart...

^{ESV} **Luke 1:46...** "My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..."

Let's pray.

¹ Gail R. O'Day, "The Praise of New Beginnings: The Infancy Hymns in Luke" in the *Journal for Preachers* 14 no 1 Advent 1990, p 3-8.

² Curtis A. Jahn, "Exegesis and Sermon Study of Luke 1:46-55: The Magnificat" at <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/JahnLuke.pdf> From the beginning, the Christian church has recognized in these three canticles the new song of the gospel, which God's people sing to the Lord (Ps 96, 98, etc.), for all three songs commemorate the Lord's incarnation as the fulfillment of his promises of salvation. So from early on, the church made these canticles its own song by incorporating them into its worship. The Nunc Dimittis has been used at least since the fourth century as a post-Communion canticle or prayer in divine services in both the East (the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom) and in the West (the Mozarabic rite); however, it was not used in the Roman rite. Not surprisingly, therefore, only a few 16th century Lutheran orders of the divine service included it. We are all familiar with the place it has enjoyed in the Common Service since the 19th century. In the daily monastic office, the Nunc Dimittis was also sung at Compline, from which it later came into the Lutheran Vespers. The Benedictus came into the Lutheran Matins via

the office of Lauds and is appropriately used as an alternative to the Te Deum especially during Advent and Lent. The Magnificat has been sung at Vespers in the Western church since the sixth century at least and was chanted to all the Gregorian psalm tones. Lutherans carried the Magnificat into Vespers, where it still occupies a prominent place today.

³ Horatio G. Spatford, "It is Well with My Soul" in the *Trinity Hymnal*, 691.

⁴ Darrell Bock, *Luke Volume 1: Luke 1:1-9:50* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, 1994), 152.