

A Mother's Song

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Scriptures: Micah 5:2–5a; Psalm 80:1–7; Hebrews 10:1–10; Luke 1:39–56

Today is known as Annunciation Sunday, the reminder that Christmas is near. The good news of the Incarnation has just about broken through the calendar and the light of the glory of God's love come down is shining through the cracks. The angels aren't yet announcing the good news to the shepherds about the baby in the manger, but perhaps they are on their way.

But even though we aren't out with the shepherds watching their flocks by night quite yet, Luke's gospel is giving us a taste of what the reign of the new King will look like. "The last will be first and the first will be last," will be a refrain of Jesus' kingdom during his earthly ministry, but the theme is there in the Gospel before he is even born. Let me tell you what I'm talking about...

Luke begins in the Temple. This is why you will often see images of an ox with wings as a representative of either Luke himself or the Gospel that he records. It begins in this sacrificial context, a place where many an ox had been sacrificed. The first character we meet is Zechariah, a priest whose turn had come up to burn incense before the Lord. While he is in that holy place Zechariah gets a word from God's messenger. Zechariah is not the high priest, and even though we are told both he and his wife were very righteous, they would have been considered outside of God's favor by many around them, for they had no children.

In his act of ordinary service, Zechariah is told that his prayers have been heard and will be answered - he will have a son. Shocked at this news, Zechariah takes a misstep and asks for the angel to prove this to him. He gets his proof by being rendered mute until he takes the humbling step of naming his son John, not Zechariah, making it look like he is going along with what his wife says in front of all his friends, even though both of them are simply being obedient to God.

Then we have the story of Mary, who is not in a position of power or even close to power, she is a young woman, soon to be married in a backwater town. She gets the good news first: Jesus is coming, and she is going to play a particularly important role. She agrees, even though this decision will marginalize her further. It will make it seem like she has been unfaithful to her husband to be, in fact, even he will need to be convinced otherwise.

And that is where we are as our reading begins for this morning, a priest, his barren wife, and her cousin who is about to be pregnant out of wedlock. It isn't exactly a superhero origin story. Or is it? Because Mary goes to see her cousin Elizabeth for a while. We aren't told this explicitly in the text, so this is just a maybe, but perhaps Mary needed to get out of town for a few months to quell the idle talk of others as her baby grew inside her. And something must have told her that being with Elizabeth and Zechariah would be a safe place for her, because that is where she goes. And indeed it was. Elizabeth gets it right away, thanks to baby John jumping inside of her, the same John that would instantly recognize Jesus as the Messiah when they would meet in the wilderness 30 years later.

So here are these two women, both carrying the smallest of persons inside of them, on the edge of a vast Empire. I am reminded of what Luke Skywalker says to C-3PO when the latter asks him about his home planet of Tatooine: "Well, if there's a bright center to the universe, you're on the planet that it's farthest from." As the gospel reminds us several times in its opening chapters, we are a long way off from the bustling metropolis of Rome or the inner workings of the Sanhedrin. And yet, here are two faithful women, carrying their faithful sons, praising the Lord. Even though this gathering would have seemed insignificant to anyone in its own day, here we are reading it two millennia later.

What struck me in considering the Magnificat this time was the strength and influence of a mother's song. I realized a bit ago the different ways in which my parents influenced me with regards to music and how I am supremely grateful for both. My Dad was the more theoretical and taste influence. We would see him perform with his trombone and his vocal quartet. We would discuss music theory and musicianship. He introduced me to Wagner and Led Zeppelin. So much of my love for music comes from my Dad. But I also remember how Mom would sing throughout her day, a hymn or something else, and how that instilled in me a desire to have music be integrated with my everyday life. You are liable to catch me singing something to myself at any point of my day, and I consider that a gift I received from my Mom. Thank the Lord for formative power of singing moms. Jesus had a singing mom.

And I don't think it is by accident that we see a lot of what would become the message of Jesus' kingdom reflected in Mary's song. It is a bit like taking the idea that the first will be last and the last will be first and putting it in verse and melody.

So let's turn to this great song of the mother of our Lord and see what it can teach us this morning. I want to begin with that continued theme of the great reversal of the Kingdom, the upside down nature of things that shows us how God sees the world:

He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
 and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and the rich he has sent away empty.

What human strength and effort places together, the way of the Kingdom undoes. What humans destroy, the ones whom they push to the edges, God raises up. This had been in the mouth of the prophets, who for centuries pleaded with the people of Israel to turn from their wicked ways, and now it is in the mouth of an unmarried, pregnant teenager from Nazareth.

I think we can hear the words of the mighty being cast down in two ways this morning, both of them helpful. First is to see how God shames the proud things of the world with the humble. This is the view from the outside, that prophetic voice of

John the Baptist in the wilderness to a corrupt and sinful world that hates the things of God. Soon it is all gonna come down. That economic injustice, that glorification of hedonism, that abuse of power at the expense of the vulnerable, it will not stand.

But I think we ought also to hear this word as a message to ourselves this morning, the inner Herod Fr. Jack talked about last week. So often we want Magnificat-style justice to come to every corner of creation besides the little kingdom of our hearts. Because I am proud in the thoughts of my heart, and that is something that Jesus comes to scatter. I want to sit on my throne and have my way at all times and Jesus has come to dethrone me. I have riches that want to possess me and so often do when I let them, that cause me to turn away empty from the way of the Kingdom. We come to the feet of Jesus a giant jangled mess of pride and humility, hunger and riches. And what we can learn from his mother's song is to bring it all to him, let him raise up what he would raise and cast down what he would cast down. We need to learn to say with Mary when she was the first one to say yes to accepting Jesus literally into her own self, "I am the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word."¹

This re-ordering of things, in the world and in ourselves, is cause for praise and rejoicing. That is the whole framing of Mary's song. The song gets its name, Magnificat, from those first words of praise: "My soul *magnifies* the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God my savior." So the justice of the Magnificat is not just about things being right for their own sake, but so that a rightly-ordered world can point us in worship toward the Creator who created things good and intends for them to

¹ Luke 1:38

remain that way. Justice isn't just for its own sake. A just world magnifies the name of the Just One. And it is in this we rejoice.

Don't miss the role of the Spirit in this song of rejoicing. The Holy Spirit is all over these first chapters of Luke's gospel. It is the Spirit who is instrumental in the Incarnation itself, who inspires Elizabeth to proclaim a blessing over Mary, who inspires Zechariah to speak the words of the Benedictus over his son John, who causes Simeon to prophesy over Jesus and Mary when Jesus is presented in the Temple. The Holy Spirit is all over the Christmas story.

So you may say this morning that you don't feel much like rejoicing. That's ok. Let the Holy Spirit do that work for you. Ask for the encouragement to rejoice in all circumstances, to magnify the good works of God when they are hard for you to see. The Spirit comes to the lowest people in faraway places. You are not out of reach.

And what a beautiful spirit-filled story we have this morning. Think again of the characters we have in this story that kicks off the message of God the Son coming to Earth. A peasant girl is the first person to say yes to Jesus. The first person to recognize his presence is a baby so small he's not even been born yet, and it is through the kicks and moves of pregnancy that his mama knows something special is going on. Then Mary sings the song that will become the theme of her son and Lord's earthly ministry: the first will be last, and the last will be first. Beautiful, timeless words.

We live in a world however, that says and tempts us to believe that all this talk of God raising up the humble is good sentiment, but that is not how the world really works. "Where are the results?" the world asks. "Doesn't the evidence suggest the contrary?" There are plenty of mighty still on their thrones and plenty of those of lowly estate suffering and dying.

This was certainly the perspective of the Roman Emperor Julian, the last pagan Emperor of Rome and a staunch detractor of Christianity. His chief complaint with the faith seems to be that it does not produce the results that he associates with divine favor, notably, power and victory in battle. Here is what he says about the way of Jesus and the worship of the Triune God, making the case that worshipping and following Yahweh has never led to any sort of thing you could call success:

"But now answer me this. Is it better to be free continuously and during two thousand whole years to rule over the greater part of the earth and the sea, or to be enslaved and to live in obedience to the will of others? No man is so lacking in self-respect as to choose the latter by preference. Again, will anyone think that victory in war is less desirable than defeat? Who is so stupid? But if this that I assert is the truth, point out to me among the Hebrews a single general like Alexander or Caesar! You have no such man. And indeed, by the gods, I am well aware that I am insulting these heroes by the question, but I mentioned them because they are well known. For the generals who are inferior to them are unknown to the multitude, and yet every one of them deserves more admiration than all the generals put together whom the Jews have had."²

² Julian the Apostate, *Against the Galileans*

Julian sounds like the cocky older brother who berates his sister for building her sandcastle too far up the beach. "You're doing it wrong," he says. "Only a nincompoop would make their castle that far away from the water. You get all the best, denser sand down here. You can easily walk to get some water for your moat. You can make those cool drippy sand towers. Only a loser would make their castle up there."

But the older brother doesn't know what's coming, does he? He hasn't seen the end of the story. When the tide rises, his sister's choice of where she built her sand castle will make a lot more sense. And everything he has built will be washed out into the sea.

As the people of God, we play the long game. We operate according to God's timeline, which means we hold out hope that the story ends in a Magnificat-looking world. We rejoice in what is already and what is not yet. And Christmas is our peak through the cracks.

So add the song of the mother of our Lord to your carols of the season, because these are Kingdom words. Rejoice with her that God has used the small things of the world to shame the big, the powerless to undo the mighty. We sing it with the generations that have come before us, the multitudes that make up that army that is known by its love, and the King of Love who leads them, the King who is a Shepherd.

Let's listen one more time:

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for he who is mighty has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

And 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 mighty from their thrones

and exalted those of humble estate;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

as he spoke to our fathers,

to Abraham and to his offspring forever."