

Mary's Song

Luke 1:46-55

These are among the most beautiful verses in all of Scripture.

Mary's canticle---or song---in which she rejoices over the great blessing God has bestowed upon her is the first Christian hymn sung by the first Christian who ever lived: a simple woman who believed the message of the angel---that God was sending His Son, Jesus Christ, into this world as the Savior of mankind.

What is so striking about Mary's response to the angel's message is the contrast between her amazement and her acceptance: she is incredulous that she should be chosen from among all women to be the mother of the Messiah, the Christ, yet she accepts the news with a quiet sort of joy.

Her reaction is the perfect response of faith to the Good News: overwhelmed by God's love for her, all she can say is, *"Let it be unto me according to Your Word."*

Mary's song divides has two parts: in the first part she rejoices that God has blessed her in spite of her 'lowliness,' and in the second part she observes that this seems to be how God always deals with mankind: He brings down the mighty and he builds up the meek.

Mary begins her song by exclaiming: *"My spirit rejoices in God, my Savior."*

Far from characterizing herself as an immaculately conceived sinless person, Mary rejoices that she has a Savior who *"...has been mindful of the humble estate of his servant."*

Now the word "servant" is a polite translation of the word in the Greek text--δουλησ---which meant "slave."

"Slave" is a word we tend to shy away from nowadays, but first-century Jews didn't share our sensitivities.

"A slave of the Lord" is exactly what the text says and exactly what Mary thought of herself as being.

She was God's possession and He could do with her as He pleased.

Now we have a lot of difficulty imagining that there can be anything good about slavery.

The thought of being "owned" is repugnant to us.

Yet the Scriptures clearly say that Jesus *redeemed* us--which means that He bought us back from Satan, to whom we once belonged, and now we belong to God.

Paul says, "...you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God..."

For Mary, the miracle was that God would honor her—a slave.

Looking through eyes of faith into the future, Mary rejoices saying, "*From now on all generations will call me blessed.*"

Blessed to be the God-bearer, blessed to be the first to hear and believe the Good News. Blessed indeed.

Why has "the Mighty One" done such great things to her?

Because "*His mercy extends to ...those who fear him.*"

Mary feared God just as any sensible slave would have feared their master.

And here's another unpopular word: "fear."

As far as we're concerned, fear is an altogether undesirable thing. There was a time—and not all that long ago—when children were taught to have a proper fear of their parents and teachers.

But now parents and teachers are encouraged to affirm children and help them build self-esteem rather than to teach them fear them.

Some professional educators believe that the job of teachers as is not to impart "dry facts" to young minds but to help them learn to express themselves.

This methodology proceeds from humanist notions of children being born naturally good and completely innocent, tiny plants which need only to be watered with affirmation and encouragement in order to bloom,

I daresay that here aren't many elementary school teachers who would agree with that description of a child.

It's neither realistic nor Biblical. The Psalmist writes: "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*" Not "respect" for the Lord' not "admiration" for the Lord; not even "love" of the Lord, but FEAR of the Lord.

Mary knew that a slave-owner could do anything he pleased with his slaves.

And just as the slave feared his owner, Mary feared God—the One who could lift her up to heaven or consign her to hell.

The Bible says, “Fear him who after the killing of the body has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.”

And, “...work out your salvation in fear and trembling for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

That is why she felt such wonder and joy that God chose to honor her.

You and I consider our freedom a birthright and take it for granted.

But what is normal for us was stunning to Mary.

The verses that follow recall the mighty deeds of God in ancient times and introduce the central idea of Mary’s song.

“He has performed mighty deeds with His arm,” echoes the words of God to Moses: *“...I will redeem you with an outstretched arm.”* (Ex. 6:6)

“He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts” refers to God’s dealings with the upstarts of Babel who tried to build a tower to heaven and were scattered over the face of the earth. (Gen. 11:9)

These two great acts of Yahweh—the destruction of the tower of Babel and the deliverance of the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage—introduce the second half of her song: God honors those who are meek and humbles those who are proud.

“He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.”

Luther called this God’s great reversal, wherein, as he put it, *“God breaks what is whole and makes whole what is broken.”*

In the beginning God created the world out of nothing and he does the same thing with people.

Out of those who are nothing in the world’s eyes—the despised, the wretched, the forgotten, the dead—he makes beautiful new creations.

On the other hand, those who are proud and honored in their own eyes He reduces to nothing.

In *Psalm 138* we read: *“Though the Lord is high, He has regard for the lowly; but the haughty He knows from afar.”*

It almost seems as if the lowlier people are, the more regard God has for them.

Peter wrote, *“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”* (1 Peter: 5:5)

This is the opposite of how we see things through worldly eyes.

In this world we honor wealth and power and privilege and we covet the admiration of our fellow human beings.

We have no desire to look into the dredges of society and contemplate poverty, disgrace, squalor and misery.

We are repelled by such things and choose to divert our eyes, even though Paul instructs us to *“...set not your mind on high things, but go along with the lowly.”*

We have a different perspective than God has

Why does God regard with contempt the “high things” of the world, and honor the “low things?”

Why did Jesus call the meek, the grieving, the hungry and the persecuted “blessed?”

The answer is implicit in Mary’s next words: *“He fills those who hunger with good things and sends the rich away empty.”*

In order to be filled with the good things God wants to give us, we first need to hunger for them, and in order to be hungry we have to be **empty**.

This is why a process called “kenosis” or “emptying” has been practiced by Christian mystics since the time of Jesus.

Sometimes it has taken the form of shedding earthly possessions so that the soul might hunger more intensely for God.

In the days of the early church it led Christian mystics who called themselves “hermits” to seek to escape the corrupting influence of the world by living in deserts and caves.

Later it led monks to withdraw into monasteries and take lifelong vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

They took Jesus' words, "*You cannot serve both God and mammon*" to mean that a life lived apart from the world and its love of wealth and glory is more likely to produce a life pleasing to God.

In our time, the Amish continue this tradition of "coming out and being separate" in the pursuit of holiness.

The problem with that line of thinking is that we can't escape sin by trying to escape from the world and its influences.

Sin doesn't originate in the world; it originates in us.

We don't become sinners by sinning; we sin because we are sinners to begin with.

Put another way, sin does not originate in our sinful thoughts or words or deeds, it originates in our hearts, which are the fountainhead of all our sinful thoughts and words and deeds.

And this disposition of the human heart remains the same whether we live in a monastery or a brothel.

So emptying ourselves can't mean just turning our backs on the world: it must mean something else.

What we really need to empty ourselves of is—***our selves***.

We are not observers of the problem; we ARE the problem.

And you can get to work emptying yourself OF yourself simply by asking God to help you take an honest look at the contents of your own heart—what Mary calls "your inmost thoughts."

With the help of the Holy Spirit, you'll be able to see them clearly, and what you see, you will want to be rid of.

Like David you will cry out, "*Create in me a clean heart O God!*"

You will hunger and thirst for righteousness, and in accordance with Jesus' promise, you will be filled with it.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied."

The mother of a newborn child is a good example of someone who has become empty.

God empties the mother of her child and then entrusts the child to her care.

I cannot imagine a more humble person, a more vulnerable and needful creature, than the mother of a newborn child.

Exhausted and weak, the mother of a newborn needs all the help she can get.

So God fills this new mother with a love for her child that probably surpasses all other forms of human love in its power, its intensity and its endurance.

“He fills those who hunger with good things....”

In his 2nd *Letter to the Corinthians*, Paul wrote: *“For when I am weak, then I am strong.”*

Mary’s words perfectly express this spirit.

Knowing that the Lord will bless and sustain a “humble servant” she rejoices in her need and in God’s provision for her need--thus balancing the divine equation.

I pray that during this Advent season we will all celebrate our need and praise God for His abundant provision.

Amen