

THE MAGNIFICAT

(Luke 1:46-55)

The words Mary sang when she found out that she was going to be the mother of the Messiah are among the most beautiful in all of Scripture.

Her canticle, her 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.

The “*Magnificat*” after the Latin translation of the first word in the song means “to magnify.”

“*My soul magnifies the Lord*” means that in the same way that a magnifying glass gathers and focuses the sunlight into an intense beam, Mary would be the means through which God would gather and focus all of His glory in the person of His Son, the Light of this world.

What is so striking about Mary’s response 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 us, all we can say is, “*Let it be unto us according to Your Word.*”

Or, in the words of one of our prominent Hope Lutheran theologians: “*Thank You for making me a member of the Lucky Bunny Club!*”

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

After rejoicing that her soul magnifies the Lord, Mary exclaims: *“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 it's important to understand that the word “servant” is a polite translation of the word in the Greek text--δουλησ--which meant “slave.”

“Slave,” of course, is a word we shy away from nowadays, but first-century Jews didn't share our sensibilities.

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

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

The miracle therefore in her mind was that God would honor her—a slave.

Yet in this bestowal of blessing we can discern the fingerprints of God, Whose Son would say, *“Blessed are the meek....”*

Looking through eyes of faith into the future, Mary rejoices, *“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 this blessing?

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 fear their master.

This is an unpopular thought in our time.

We think of fear and enslavement as categorical negatives.

Parents and teachers are discouraged from causing children to fear them, and from “enslaving” their minds with fixed dogmas.

Instead, they are encouraged to affirm them and help them build self-esteem.

Some professional educators tell us that our job as adults is not to impart “dry facts” to young minds but to help them learn to express themselves.

Now while this methodology may fit in nicely with humanist notions of children being born naturally good and completely innocent, like tiny plants which need only to be watered with affirmation and encouragement in order to bloom, it is unrealistic.

Any experienced parent will tell you that children are not perfect little creatures.

That at times they are drawn to sinful behavior just as adults are.

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.

In an age when slavery was a fact of life, Mary knew that a slave-owner could do anything he pleased with his slaves.

And so as the slave feared the master, Mary feared God—who could raise her to heaven or consign her to hell.

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

You and I who fear no tyrant and consider freedom our birthright find it hard to identify with Mary.

We are more-or-less “comfortable” with God’s daily blessings; they no longer surprise us.

If anything, they seem appropriate—or maybe we even think that we are providing them for ourselves.

But what is unsurprising to us was stunning to Mary.

God had honored her—a slave.

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 how God dealt 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, 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.”*

And so just as in the beginning God created the world out of nothing, so He continues to do His work today.

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

On the other hand, those who are proud and honored in the world's eyes are as nothing to God.

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

In fact, it almost seems as if the further beneath Him people are, the more regard God has for them.

As 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, isn't it?

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

We have no desire to wander around in the dredges of society and contemplate poverty, disgrace, squalor and misery.

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

We have a different perspective and a different set of values 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 of God, we first need to hunger for them, and in order to hunger for them we first have to become **empty**.

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

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

It led Christian mystics who called themselves “hermits” to seek to escape the corrupting influence of the world by living in deserts and caves and even trees.

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

They took Jesus’ words, “*You cannot love 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.

There’s only one problem with this line of thinking: we can’t escape sin by trying to escape 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 seedbed of our sinful thoughts and words and deeds.

And this disposition of the human heart toward evil 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.

Along with David you will cry out, “*Create in me a clean heart O God!*”

You will hunger and thirst for righteousness, and the Lord will fill you with good things.

No one becomes suddenly emptier, in a very real sense, than the mother of a newborn child.

Every mother has been blessed by God to be His co-creator of a human life—an image-bearer of God.

And God’s way of blessing a mother is to empty her of this new life and then entrust it to her care.

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

Exhausted, weak, emptied of physical strength, the mother of a newborn needs all the help she can get.

And then 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 fulfilling the divine equation.

May we all, during this Advent season, celebrate our need—and God's abundant provision for our need—in the birth of our Savior.

Amen.