

Luke 1:39-56 (NRSV)

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." ⁴⁶And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Luke 3:7-18 (NRSV)

⁷John [the baptizer] said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

When have you heard the sound of joy? Surely, it was at Christmas.

Sheer Joy!

Luke is a master storyteller and is in no hurry to get to the story of Jesus' birth. In last week's passage, we saw a befuddled and skeptical Zechariah struggling to use sign language to tell others the remarkable news of the angel Gabriel's visitation and the announcement that Elizabeth, Zechariah's long childless wife, would give birth. When Elizabeth was about six months pregnant, Gabriel made another visit. This time he

visited Elizabeth's young, poor, and unmarried cousin, Mary. Mary was engaged to marry Joseph, and she was understandably perplexed by the angel's visit. Despite Mary's virginity, Gabriel told her that God's Holy Spirit would come upon her. She would conceive and give birth to a child to be named Jesus and called the Son of God. Her son would be given the throne of David and a kingdom that would have no end. To all this Mary would simply reply, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (See Luke 1:26-38 for the announcement of Jesus' birth.)

So, sometime thereafter Mary went to visit Elizabeth in her home. One woman is old, but now pregnant long after giving up hope. The other is young and unmarried, but now pregnant and carrying the hope of Israel. Joy floods the room. At the mere sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's baby leaps in her womb. Elizabeth herself is nearly overcome with the power of it all . . . she knows that Mary is the mother of her Lord.

This story invites us to look back on our own lives and find those moments when we were flooded by joy and excitement that seemed to overwhelm, that seemed impossible to contain. Surely, Elizabeth and Mary experience that and more.

The Magnificat

Mary's song in verses 46 to 55 is often referred to as the Magnificat, after the first word in the early Latin translation of the Bible (the "Vulgate"¹). In the Vulgate, the opening of the song is "'Magnificat anima mea, Dominum", or, "My soul doth magnify the Lord." As you can see, the NRSV preserves the word "magnify" in its translation of the couplet that opens the song. Other translations use words like "proclaims . . . exalts . . . praises . . . glorifies." Mary knows that this is magnificent!

Over the centuries, Mary's Magnificat has been set to music by many, but certainly the most well-known piece is Johann Sebastian Bach's choral masterpiece, the *Magnificat*. One of the few times that he used a Latin text, Bach's *Magnificat* debuted on Christmas Day, 1723, at the Church of St. Nicholas (really!) in Leipzig, Germany.

1. In about 400 AD, a Christian Bishop, Jerome, translated portions of the Bible into Latin. His work and that of others developed into the standard Latin version of the Bible, known as the Vulgate. This Latin Bible was the dominant Bible for centuries. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church designated the Vulgate as their only official Bible. It may surprise you to learn that it was called the Vulgate because in 400AD Latin was the common or "vulgar" language.

Mary's Song

Fred Craddock notes that there are a couple of things about Mary's song that deserve special attention:

- God is praised in terms of what he has already done. All the verbs dealing with the establishment of justice and mercy are *past* tense. Recall that the promises from Isaiah about a child being born, a Son given, were all in *present* tense. As Craddock puts it, "the language expresses what is timelessly true: past, present, and future without differentiation."¹ It is a way of expressing confidence in God and the certainty of his promises. Mary knows that God's promises are as good as done.
- Verses 52 & 53 are the most intense images in the song. They are a classic statement of God's purposes. God turns the world upside down. He brings down the powerful and lifts up the weak. He feeds the hungry and sends away the rich. Though these can be hard words for us to hear, compare them to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). From his first choosing of Israel, God had always

¹from Fred Craddock's commentary on Luke in the *Interpretation* series, John Knox Press, 1990.

been the protector of the weak and the champion of the oppressed, and he expected no less from his own people. Mary was oppressed (a woman in a patriarchal culture) and poor and inconsequential – she *knew* that she needed a Savior (v. 47). The difficulty for the rich and powerful has always been that their seeming self-sufficiency blinds them to their own need for a Savior. Unless we recognize and embrace our need to be saved, the Christmas proclamation will never be anything more to us than a nice story about a pregnant teenager, a baby in a manger, and some gift-giving.

There is so much going on at Christmas that I often struggle to keep my priorities straight, to hear the true joy of the season. Perhaps I should spend more time singing Mary's song. Does my soul magnify the Lord? Do I truly rejoice in God my Savior? Do you?

God's Son . . . great joy . . . now what?

But what about Elizabeth's son? It is John who would grow up to baptize Jesus and pronounce him to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). What would John say if we asked him to describe the new heart promised by God through his prophet Jeremiah? We get the answer in today's passage from the third chapter of Luke's gospel.

God-bearer

In Christian theology, Mary is referred to as the *theotokos*, literally, "God-bearer." In early Christianity, there were some who wanted to refer to Mary only as *christotokos*, literally "Messiah-bearer."

The Christian community affirmed the term *theotokos*, not because of what it says about Mary, but because of what it says about Jesus. It doesn't mean that Mary is the source of God, but that she is the one through whom God was made flesh. Thus, calling Mary *theotokos* was a way to affirm Jesus' divinity, just as the Virgin Birth was a way to affirm Jesus' humanity.

In his reflections on John's instructions in this passage, N. T. Wright tells the following story:

"A cartoon shows a skeptic shouting up to the heavens, 'God!, If you're up there, tell us what we should do!'

Back comes a voice: 'Feed the hungry, house the homeless, establish justice.'

The skeptic looks alarmed. 'Just testing,' he says.

'Me too,' replies the voice."

John the Baptizer lays it out straight and plain. Got two coats. Give one to someone who is cold. Got two sandwiches? Give one to someone who is hungry. Are you a tax collector? You don't have to make yourself unemployed, but you better start collecting only what is due. Tax collectors in that day

were, you see, entrepreneurs who extracted as much money as they could get away with and would then keep anything that wasn't due to the government. No more lining one's pockets at the expense of others. Period. Soldiers? Like the tax-collectors, stop abusing people. Don't use your power over others to put your interests ahead of theirs. Just because you don't get paid as much as you'd like, you can't just take it from those who are weaker than you.

In all these cases, what is John doing? He is painting a portrait of a new heart, a heart that puts the interest of others ahead of its own. A heart that is forgiving and generous. A heart that doesn't insist on returning every slight with a slap. A heart that beats with sheer joy you can almost hear. . . . That's a Christmas heart.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Can you even imagine the sheer joy that must have been running through Elizabeth and Mary? Luke's Gospel is filled with such stories of joy. What are some joyful stories of your own life? What have been the most joy-filled times in your life? I remember that when my sons were born I felt like I was electrified . . . though, in truth, I don't know that I can really describe my feelings. Perhaps it was one of those out-of-the-body experiences. I simply remember being joyful in every part of my being. Perhaps that is what it was like for Elizabeth and Mary. Discuss what these joyful experiences have in common. How might they point us toward God, especially God as Savior and Redeemer? What does the power of these experiences reveal to us about God?
2. Have you ever *heard* joy? Mary's song is certainly a song of joy, as is so much our Advent and Christmas music. What role does music play in our lives as Christians? Why is music featured so prominently among St. Andrew's ministries? John Wesley's brother, Charles, wrote thousands of hymns. "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" has the words of Charles Wesley set to the music of Felix Mendelssohn. What is it about music that makes it such an important part of Christmas? What are some important ways in which the sacred music of Christmas differs from the secular music?

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Sermon Notes
