

The Danger of Being Blessed
Luke 1:39-56

We Americans are in the midst of our biggest holiday season, a season which begins with Thanksgiving and ends with Christmas and New Years. It's a hectic time, but can be a fun time too, a time when we rejoice in the midst of peace and still considerable prosperity. As we exchange gifts and attend parties, I think most of us are truly thankful that we have been so blessed.

Mary also knew what it means to be on the receiving end of blessings, didn't she? In this scene, Mary comes in to visit her cousin Elizabeth after about a 60 mile trip from Nazareth. This was, of course, a normal and natural thing for a young girl to do – to help an older relative who is getting ready to have a baby. The last verse of the passage tells us that Mary stayed for three months, time enough for the baby to arrive, and doubtless she was a big help to Elizabeth during her visit.

But this was no ordinary family visit. Last week we read that the angel Gabriel had come to visit Mary, to tell her that she, too, would have a child, and that her child would be the Messiah, the long-awaited Son of David. But more than that, the angel told Mary that she would have this baby while she was still a virgin. Thus, her Child would not just be the Son of David. He would be divine – the Son of God. No doubt, Mary felt quite overwhelmed by all this.

But God had also given her a sign to demonstrate the truth of her blessings to come – the fact of her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy. Why would this be a sign of God's power? Because Elizabeth was too old to have children. So, it's no wonder that Mary went with haste to see Elizabeth. Some confirmation of all these confusing things would be welcome. Perhaps Elizabeth would help her sort all this out.

But how great Mary's surprise must have been when she walked in Elizabeth's door, not to be the bearer of news, but once again to receive a prophetic witness. How amazed she must have been to find that Elizabeth already knew all about Mary's pregnancy.

How could Elizabeth have known that Mary was to be the Mother of the Messiah? Because God had told her. God had filled Elizabeth with His Holy Spirit. Thus she greeted her young cousin, not as a welcome helper, but as the mother of a king.

But Elizabeth wasn't the only one who recognized Mary's special role in God's plan of redemption. Elizabeth's baby hadn't even been born yet, and yet the baby who would one day be called John the Baptist began to the job that would occupy his whole life. By leaping for joy in Mary's presence, he pointed to Jesus as the Messiah

Mary now has three supernatural prophetic witnesses – Gabriel, Elizabeth, and the unborn baby John – all testifying to the truth that Mary’s baby would in fact be the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of God.

And it all sinks in. Mary finally realizes how greatly she will be blessed. Mary realizes that, indeed all generations will call her blessed.

So, what exactly would that mean for Mary? For all she knew, she was about to be catapulted from poverty and obscurity into wealth and fame. She was to be the mother of the Messiah, the mighty king that the Israelites expected to destroy their hated Roman occupiers. So, how easy it would be for her to start acting like a queen! How easy it would be for her to fall into the sin of pride.

We Americans are no stranger to such temptation. Although they envy us, all the nations of the world call us blessed, too. And we are blessed. Even in the midst of our ongoing economic downturn we are still unimaginably wealthy by world standards. We are still overwhelmingly powerful, when compared to any other nation. Our wealth and our power are undeniable facts.

But even if it would be easy for us Americans to be proud, it would be no less sinful. For however great may be our power and wealth, the only reason we have them is because God has, in one way or another, given them to us.

So how do we avoid the sin of pride when we cannot deny the reality of our blessings? Well, how did Mary handle such a danger? She didn’t deny her blessings. She didn’t refuse her blessings. She acknowledged her blessings, but at the same time, she gave all the credit for them to God. In other words, she dealt with the danger of being blessed by focusing, not on herself, and not on the gifts she had been given, but on the Giver of all good gifts. Although she had good reason to think she would be exalted, instead, she exalted God. Although she had every reason to rejoice in her blessings, instead, she rejoiced in God.

And what is it about God that caused Mary to rejoice? Much of her song of praise to God in verses 46-55 is an extended reflection on God’s justice. Instead of falling prey to the sin of pride, Mary points out that God will in fact scatter the proud. Instead of rejoicing in the political power she might reasonably expect to wield, Mary rejoices that God will put down the mighty. Instead of anticipating the immense wealth that the mother of a king can command, Mary rejoices that God will send the rich away empty, that God will not allow the poor and despised to suffer forever.

Mary also rejoices that her God is holy. She knew that God will punish the proud and the wicked precisely because they have forgotten Him, because they have neglected His law of love.

A holy God cannot and will not allow the wicked, the selfish, those who squander or hoard their gifts to go unpunished.

And Mary is glad that hers is a Mighty God, a God Who has power to bring justice and holiness to the world. It is His strong arm that will scatter the proud and bring down the mighty, for nothing in which human beings put their trust, no armies, no warriors, no warhorses, can possibly compare with His strength.

In short, Mary deals with the potential problem of pride by focusing not on herself and her blessings, but on her God, the God of justice and holiness and power.

So, what about us? Do we, can we American Christians rejoice along with Mary? We are, after all, much more like the hated Romans than like the persecuted Jews. Can we really be glad that ours is a God Who brings down rulers from their thrones? In our wealth that would have been unimaginable to Mary, are we really glad that our God is the One Who sends the wealthy away empty-handed?

And as we to a greater and greater extent embrace pluralist views of truth, as we celebrate perversion as a civil right, as we turn a blind eye as the blood of the unborn is spilled, as we support with our votes and taxes policies that increasingly trap the poor in their poverty, are we really glad that our God is holy, and that He insists on holiness?

We can share Mary's gladness if we look at what else Mary's meditation tells us about God. For if Mary rejoices in God's justice, she also rejoices in God's mercy. God doesn't just humble the exalted – He also exalts the humble. God doesn't just send the rich away – He also fills the hungry with good things. God doesn't just oppose His enemies – He also helps his servants. The good news is that God shows mercy to those who fear Him.

And if Mary rejoices that God is holy, always upholding the truth of His law, she also rejoices that God is faithful to His promises. By blessing Mary, God was keeping a promise He had made thousands of years earlier, a promise to Abraham that we read in our responsive reading this morning: "In you shall all the families of the earth be blessed." Jesus was the blessing promised to Abraham, the seed of Abraham in whom blessings come for people all over the world, for people who, as Paul says, share the faith of Abraham, for people who put their trust in Christ.

So yes, Mary rejoices because God is holy and just, but also because God is merciful and faithful. The question for us, then, is which side of God's character will we see when He comes again? The question for us is, on the day that the Messiah appears in the way that those Ancient Jews thought he would, on the day that He fully and finally scatters the proud and brings down the rulers from their thrones, how will we feel the measure of God's might? On that great Day of

Judgment will Christ use His mighty power to cast us down or to raise us up? Will Christ use His power to fill us with good things or to send us away empty?

At first glance, things don't look good for us Americans, wealthy and powerful and sinful as we are. But once again, Mary shows us the way. Think again about her expectations. Like all of her countrymen, she was probably expecting the Messiah to establish His reign on the earth right then, to bring justice to His enemies and to bless His people with peace. She could very easily have expected to be, if not the Queen of Heaven, at least the Queen Mother of Israel.

But she doesn't take either of these royal titles for herself. In the midst of her undeniable, unimaginable blessings, she instead calls herself the humble handmaiden, the bondservant of God. Even in the midst of amazing blessings, she remembers that she was, after all, an ordinary girl. It is Mary's humility that allows her to overcome the danger of being blessed.

And her humility was based in no small part on her recognition that no matter how greatly she would be blessed, she continued to be a sinner in need of a Savior. For that's what she says in verse 47, isn't it? She calls God her Savior, and as Paul tells us in our responsive reading, God continues to save all those who put their faith in Mary's Son.

American Christians, this is the way that we must approach our Lord. Yes we have been richly blessed. And we can choose to cling to our blessings, relying on them, trusting in them. We can choose to remain proud and self-sufficient. We can keep on clinging to our sin, glorifying ourselves, walking in the light of our own reason and our own experience. But if we do that, we can be sure that God will scatter us along with our false idols, whatever they are. We can be sure that God will bring us down from our seats of power and send us away empty.

Or we can confess our pride. We can acknowledge our need of a savior. We can admit that, in spite of all our worldly blessings, we really are poor and needy, hungry for the things that matter the most. We can turn to our Almighty, Merciful, Faithful God, and trust Him to save us, to humble us and heal us, and to use us for His glory.

And if we humble ourselves before God, we can be sure that He will keep His promise to Abraham, to bless us through the Son of Abraham, Jesus Christ. We can be sure that He will keep His promise to help his servants, showing us mercy and grace. For God has already kept His greatest promise, sending His Son into the world to save us, just as He will one day send His Son to reign over the world.

So this Christmas, along with Mary, let's rejoice in God our Savior. Let's rejoice in Christ our King. Let's rejoice that in Christ, God is with us, as we sing all the stanzas of Hark the Herald Angels Sing.