

Magnificat
Luke 1:39-56

After Mary came to see her cousin Elizabeth, she could no longer have any room for doubt. Not that Mary hadn't believed what Gabriel had told her – as we saw in the previous passage last week, she was willing to submit herself completely to God's will. She was willing to play her part in God's great plan of salvation for His people. But it was all a bit much to take in – that an angel of God would show up and talk to her, that she would be able to give birth to a child without having relations with a man, and that the child would be the long-awaited Messiah. Yes, she was willing to go along with what the angel said, but a little confirmation would be welcome – after all, it could have been some sort of strange dream, right?

Well, as soon as she entered Elizabeth's house, it became obvious that this was no dream, no hallucination. For when he heard Mary's voice, the baby John the Baptist made his first prophecy, leaping for joy in Elizabeth's womb. But that wasn't all – Elizabeth herself was filled with the Holy Spirit and told Mary that everything the angel had said to her was true. She confirmed that Mary's baby would somehow be her Lord, and she praised Mary for believing what the angel had said to her.

So, how did Mary respond to this miraculous confirmation of the angel's equally miraculous news? She composed a poem called in Latin the Magnificat, one that has been treasured for centuries and set to music countless times. But unlike the proclamations from Gabriel, John, and Elizabeth, this is not so much a message from God, although it was most certainly inspired by the Holy Spirit. Instead, this is a message for God, a song of praise and adoration, a reflection on God's grace and mercy, a meditation on the wonder of God's blessings.

Now, as we might expect, Mary begins her poem on a personal note. In verses 48 and 49 she marvels that she would be remembered for the rest of human history because God had chosen her to play a critical role in His plan to redeem His people. But along with her joy and faith in God's promises, a humble amazement comes through – she is simply overwhelmed that the Almighty God would choose to do such a great thing for her and through her, that God Himself would condescend to bless someone like her, an ordinary girl from an obscure, out-of-the-way town. In her humility she thus calls herself, not the Queen of Heaven, but the handmaiden, the bondservant of God.

In this way, Mary sets a tremendous example for us, showing us the way that we should respond to God when He blesses us. After all, what do any of us have to be proud of? Material possessions? Academic or vocational abilities? Physical beauty or health? None of these things will last even beyond our lifetimes, while the example of Mary's humility endures today. So, if the mother of Jesus could find no room for pride in her life, how can we?

But Mary's poem sets another example for us – not just of humility but of immense learning. For she not only understood that God was being gracious to her as an individual. Because of her thorough knowledge of the Scriptures, she knew that the birth of her Child would in some way be a fulfillment of so many of the prophecies and promises God had made to all of His people throughout the Old Testament. In the same way, the more we know about God's word, the greater our confidence in His power and faithfulness should be.

At the very end of the poem, for example, she points to God's promise to Abraham, a promise made some 2000 years before her time and thus some 4000 years before our own. Yes, way back in Genesis chapter 12, God had not only promised to bless and protect Abraham personally. And God not only promised that Abraham would become a great nation by having many descendants. And God not only promised to give those descendants the land in which Abraham himself was merely a wanderer. No, God also said that somehow through Abraham all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

And all those promises were, in fact, fulfilled in the coming of Mary's Son. For Jesus did not just come to save the Jews, the physical descendants of Abraham. No, He came so that both Jew and Gentile could be redeemed from our sins. He came so that a multitude that cannot be numbered, so that people from every tribe and tongue and nation who share the faith of Abraham could one day stand on a transformed earth, speaking in one voice in praise of our God Who sits on the throne, in praise of the Lamb of God, Mary's son, for their salvation. It's no wonder that Mary exalted the Lord. It's no wonder that Mary rejoiced in the Lord – for He is faithful.

Ah, but what sort of salvation would Mary's Child bring to all the nations? In verses 51 and 52, she meditates on the perfect justice that the Messiah would bring to the world. She looks forward to the time when the proud will be scattered and the mighty will be toppled from their seats of power. In making this point, she turns to another place in the Old Testament, to Psalm 107, in which the Psalmist praises God for pouring contempt on the princes who oppress God's people with misery and sorrow. For someone like Mary, someone living under the tyrannical occupation of the Roman army, knowing that God is a God of justice would be a great comfort indeed.

But Mary's longing for justice doesn't just apply to her time, does it? Our own news sources are filled with the cries of Black Lives Matter protesters and Pro-life advocates alike. And how many times have we all put our faith in politicians to make things right, only to see them go back on their promises after they have been elected? No, if there's anything we all should have learned by now, it is that we should put our faith, not in any human Caesar, but only in King Jesus to bring the sort of justice Mary describes.

But in verses 52 and 53 Mary gives another reason for her rejoicing, as she looks forward to yet another way in which the Messiah will bless all the nations – not just by protecting the powerless but by providing for the poor. In this, she uses a direct quote from Psalm 107, which praises the God Who "has satisfied the thirsty soul and the hungry soul He has filled with what is good."

And just as God's promise to Abraham extended to all the nations, so Psalm 107 makes clear that God's promise of protection and provision applies to all kinds of people. The Psalmist gives thanks to God for breaking the bonds of those who live in darkness and the shadow of death, and for protecting sailors from the dangers of the winds and the waves. He even thanks God for saving rebellious fools from the consequences of their sins.

And that points to perhaps the greatest reason for Mary's rejoicing – and for ours. For in verse 50, she also quotes from Psalm 103, our responsive reading this morning, praising God for the mercy that He extends from generation to generation on those that fear Him. Somehow, Mary was convinced that her child would not only protect His people and provide for His people but would be part of God's plan to pardon His people, to remove our sins from us as far as the east is from the west.

Yes, that is the greatest reason for all of us to join Mary in magnifying, in exalting our God Who is merciful and gracious, our God Who is slow to anger and abounding in faithful, steadfast, covenant love. That's the greatest reason for us to join Mary in rejoicing in God our Savior, because He has the same sort of compassion on us that fathers have for their children, because His mercy is as great as the heavens are high above the earth.

But we have even more reason to praise God for His faithful, covenant-keeping love than Mary did, because we know how God would eventually demonstrate His mercy to us, how God would implement His plan to protect and provide for and pardon a world full of sinners.

Now, Mary understood some of this. After all, Gabriel told Mary to name her baby Jesus, which means Savior. And yes, Jesus did grow up to save His people in so many ways of the ways that Mary and so many others doubtless expected. Jesus fed 5000 families with 5 dinner rolls and a couple of sardines. Jesus brought healing to a leper with a touch and raised Lazarus from the dead by the word of His power. In these and so many other unmistakable ways, He showed God's love and power to His people. But He didn't seize power and break their bondage to the Roman Empire – and that's why they eventually turned on Him.

Now, we know that Jesus still provides for all our physical needs, blessing us in ways too numerous to count. And we know that Jesus still answers our prayers for healing, even bringing people back from the brink of death itself. But in addition to all the material blessings He pours out on us, we know that Jesus did in fact save us from a much greater threat than that of the Roman Empire. For Jesus was the perfect, spotless Lamb of God, the One who would take away the sin of the world by shedding His own blood on the cross, dying to pay the penalty that all our sins deserve.

Moreover, we know that by the power of His resurrection, He has set all His people free from bondage to sin and death, restoring us to a perfect relationship with the Father. And we know that Jesus will come again to establish His perfect justice throughout all the world, bringing vindication to all those who are oppressed. Oh yes, we have even more reasons than Mary did to bless the Lord, to bless His holy name.

So, during this Christmas season, let us join Mary in trusting God to keep His promises – promises to forgive all who would trust in Christ as Savior. Let us join Mary in submitting herself to the will of God, as we bow the knee in obedience to Christ as the Lord of our lives. Let us rejoice with Mary that in Jesus Christ, God has blessed us in so many ways, giving us protection from our enemies, provision of our needs, and pardon for our sins. For then we can join the psalmists in their wholehearted hymns of praise and thanksgiving to God, blessing the Lord with all that is within us. Then we can join Mary in exalting the Lord and rejoicing in the God of our salvation.