

Mary's Song: Upside Down Luke 1:46-55 12/8/19

This morning we are talking once again about Mary's Song, formally known as the Magnificat. This passage is known world-wide and is often used in the Roman Catholic mass. Mary originally offered this song after the angel appeared to her to tell her she would give birth to the Messiah. Here's the first part of the song, found in Luke 1, which Lou focused on last Sunday. ⁴⁶*And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and 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.* (Luke 1:46-50)

These are very personal words, aren't they? Notice all the personal pronouns. "My soul...my spirit...my Savior...generations will call me blessed...done great things for me." Mary, in crisis due to this unexpected pregnancy, nevertheless trusts that God is doing a great thing through her and she gives thanks to God. She is a wonderful example of someone who has extraordinary faith in God, with a trusting vision of God's future for her. This part of the prayer is the most familiar part. It's a feel-good kind of prayer. And it's comfortable to preach on.

Someone once said that there are two parts to preaching well. The first is to comfort the afflicted. And that's what this part of the prayer does for us! It encourages us to have faith in the face of personal challenges like Mary did. In addition to comforting the afflicted, the other part of preaching is afflicting the comfortable! The second part of the prayer does that well! Listen and you'll see what I mean.

⁵¹(God) 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.” (Luke 1:51-55)

This part of the prayer is so radical that it was banned by several governments. The British banned its public reading in India when India was seeking independence. When India finally became a sovereign nation, Gandhi, who was not a Christian, asked that it be read wherever British flags were lowered and Indian flags raised. Similar bans on the reading of these verses have happened in Guatemala and Argentina. Frankly, these words make me uncomfortable, too! They call for overturning the social order, and my life is pretty good with the way things are!

Now, it's important to remember the situation in which Mary was living. Her home was in Roman-occupied Israel, a country that had been under foreign domination for centuries. The prophets had long called for justice and freedom from oppression, and foretold the coming of a Messiah who would liberate God's people, Israel. But the words of Mary's song still resonate today. Let's look at them in a little more detail.

Verse 51 says, "*He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*" Throughout the Old Testament, those who are proud are the ones who oppose God's rule. They believe that they are self-sufficient and have no need for God's help. The Psalmist calls them fools! In Mary's time Greeks and Romans took great pride in their advanced thinking and culture, looking down on other people and their cultures. That's likely who Mary had in mind when she spoke these words.

But pride has not gone away in the 21st century. In fact, there has been a resurgence of it! Certainly, there are outspoken atheists who ridicule Christian belief. And there are leaders in many areas of life who believe that we are self-sufficient and have no need of God or of one another- that we alone know what is true and best. That there is no need to cooperate with other "inferior" races or cultures or nations. Pride is still a

problem today, and Mary believes that God will one day put an end to it, “scattering the proud,” in her words. Let’s keep going.

The next verse says, ⁵²*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;* (Luke 1:52) Uh oh! Now Mary is sounding pretty revolutionary, perhaps even treasonous! Who was sitting on the thrones in Mary’s day? Well, Caesar Augustus was on the throne in Rome, emperor of the most powerful empire in the world. And his minion, Herod the Great, was on the throne in Israel. He was a tyrant who was remembered for his great building projects in Judea, but who was also a paranoid, murderous man. Remember the story in Matthew’s gospel where a king murders the innocent male children of Bethlehem to eliminate any pretenders to his throne? That was Herod.

Mary has guts! She says that rulers like Caesar and Herod will be brought down, while the lowly are lifted up. Can you see why the public reading of these verses was banned at times? And she’s not done. Look at verse 53! ⁵³*he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.* (Luke 1:53) This thought continues the grand reversal that Mary foresees. The hungry will be filled, and the rich will have nothing. The powerful will be brought down and the lowly lifted up. The proud will be scattered.

The biblical writers knew that many of those in power, those who were wealthy, got that way by oppressing the poor. Their call for social justice was a call to end oppression by the wealthy and powerful. Listen to these words from Amos, *“But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”* (Amos 5:24) And Micah, *“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”* (Micah 6:8) In her song, Mary is walking the path worn down by God’s prophets over the centuries, calling for justice, kindness, and humility.

And Jesus walked the same path! Listen to these words from Luke 4 as Jesus began his ministry in Nazareth, *“¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this*

scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:16-21) Jesus sees this great reversal, the lifting up of the poor and oppressed, as his call, too!

Through the centuries, Christians have also seen this as our call. In this country, Christians worked tirelessly for the abolition of slavery, the end to racial segregation, and the enactment of civil rights legislation. They worked to end child labor and the abuse of alcohol. Christian missionaries in the 19th century worked in South Africa to prevent wealthy landowners from taking over native lands. They worked in the Congo to prevent the abuses of native people on rubber plantations by photographing the abuses and showing those photos throughout the US and Britain. They helped end the practice of foot-binding in China and provided education for women around the world. They even championed better treatment of animals in England. And efforts like these have made a significant difference for millions of people!

But there is still more to do, including right here at home. The growing gap between rich and poor in this country will inevitably lead to more division and instability. And, it's unjust! The average CEO in the US earned 287 times as much as the average worker in 2018. That's up from 42 times as much in 1980. The Amazon corporation earned \$11 billion last year. Do you know how much tax they paid? Zero! In fact, they received a tax rebate of \$129 million! In what universe is that fair? How can we

change our tax laws and business practices to allow all of us to share in our economic blessings? We've done a better job of this in the past.

Or, consider this. The US has only about 5% of the world's population, yet 25% of the world's prisoners are in this country! Why is that? Are we inherently more evil than other places? Over 50% of those held in federal prisons are there for non-violent drug-related crimes. How could our justice system become more just?

And we still have work to do around racial equality. A few years ago Edward Ellis was working as a college chaplain at Norfolk State University in Virginia. One night around 2AM he received a call from Willie, an African-American student who was a leader in one of his campus fellowship groups. On the way home from a Christian concert, Willie had stopped at a supermarket to purchase some chips and a soda. While waiting at the checkout line, he opened the bag and began eating his chips. Immediately, a policeman came over and arrested him.

Willie called Rev. Ellis from the jail, who asked him what else he was doing to cause the arrest. "Nothing!" said Willie. "I was waiting in the line with money in my hand and he arrested me." Rev. Ellis rushed down to the jail, and found that Willie was telling the truth. There is a law there that prohibits people from consuming something until they have paid for it- even if you are standing in line with money in your hand!

Rev. Ellis pleaded for understanding and common sense to prevail. He admitted that he had done the same thing himself! But the police officers would not listen, so Rev. Ellis posted Willie's bail and took him home, furious that Willie, a promising student, would now have a criminal record.

Rev. Ellis shared this story in a sermon at a largely white church the following Sunday. Unknown to him, a lot of young, white mothers in that congregation shopped at the same supermarket, and would often open a box of crackers while standing in line to keep their kids occupied while they waited. They went to the management of the supermarket and protested the unfair treatment of this young, black, Christian student.

Soon Rev. Ellis received a call from the regional manager of the supermarket, who apologized and stated that the store would drop all charges against Willie. Most of us aren't even aware of it, but we've still got a way to go with racial fairness in this country, don't we?

According to Mary's song, God is involved in bringing hope and comfort to us when we are personally in need. And God is also involved in righting wrongs, and bringing justice to all people. He wants us to be part of that work. Yahuda Bauer, a Holocaust scholar, suggests that we add three more commandments to the Ten we have: "Thou shall not be a perpetrator. Thou shall not be a victim. And thou shall never, but never be

a bystander.” What are you doing to support God’s work of bringing social justice to our world? Don’t be a bystander.