

Mary's Song: Once and Future King Luke 1:51-55 12/15/19

There are only about ten days left until Christmas, which brings us one of the great ethical questions our age: Is re-gifting a morally acceptable practice? Is it OK to pass along a gift you received, but don't want or can't use? Doesn't re-gifting deceive the other person into thinking that you carefully selected that wonderful ugly sweater just for them? On the other hand, if they enjoy the gift, does it really matter where it came from? I'll leave it up to you to try to resolve this thorny issue, but I thought I'd raise the matter today, because some of you may feel like preaching three back-to-back sermons on the same scripture passage is kind of like re-gifting! And it gets worse! If you come back next Sunday at 9:30AM, you'll hear today's sermon again! That's because the 9:30 service has the Children's Christmas Pageant today, and this service will have the Christmas Cantata next Sunday. So, it is a case of sermon re-gifting! You've been warned!

So let's get started with our 3rd sermon on the Magnificat. Listen as I read the second part of Mary's Song from Luke 1:51-55. *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.” (Luke 1:51-55)

Last Sunday, we focused on this part of the prayer, noting Mary’s vision of a time when the social order will be overturned, and justice will prevail for all people.

After last week’s sermon, one of you pointed out something in the passage that is confusing, to say the least. Mary uses past tense verbs in this passage (technically the Greek aorist tense). God “*has scattered*” the proud, “*has brought down*” the powerful and “*lifted up*” the lowly. He “*has filled*” the hungry, “*sent*” the rich away empty, and, “*has helped*” Israel. That seems strange, doesn’t it? Because, last time I checked, evil people were still in power in many places in our world, people without power were still being oppressed, and the hungry and rich haven’t traded places!

What’s up with that? I guess Mary could be talking about the past, because there were times when God intervened in human history and some of these things did happen- like Israel’s deliverance from slavery in the powerful nation of Egypt, and their victories over various oppressing nations in Canaan. But none of this lasted, and none of it happened on any kind of grand scale. So, I think it’s unlikely that Mary was thinking solely about what had happened in the past here.

I believe that what Mary is talking about here is what Jesus called the Kingdom of God or the Reign of God. The idea is found in the Lord's Prayer when we pray, "*Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" That's what Mary is talking about here- that social relationships here on earth would be like those in heaven, where everyone is treated fairly and justly, and no one suffers because of the actions of another. But is this Kingdom of God a present reality- something that can happen here and now- or is it something that will only happen in the future? That's the question Mary's Song raises for us today.

Here's what Jesus had to say about the matter in Luke 17.

²⁰*Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed;* ²¹*nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."* (Luke 17:20,21) Here, Jesus makes it clear that the Kingdom of God is a present reality. "It is here among you," he says. He is probably referring to his own ministry of healing the sick, advocating for the outcasts of society, and preaching the Good News of God's love for all people. When God took on human flesh and entered the world that first Christmas, the Kingdom of God began to work its way into our world.

Jesus also compared the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed that starts small, grows very slowly, and becomes larger and larger. And he said that it is like yeast kneaded into bread dough permeating the whole batch of dough. So God's kingdom is growing and working its way into our societies in the here and now. That's what Jesus taught.

But that's not all that Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God.

⁷They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" ²⁵"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:7,25-28)

Wow! In teachings like this one, and in parables like the Ten Bridesmaids, the Sheep and the Goats, and the talents, Jesus taught that there is a future dimension to the Kingdom of God, when God will break into human history in a dramatic fashion and set things right on the whole earth. Then the things that Mary sang about will come to full fruition.

So, which is it? Is the Kingdom of God a present reality or a future event? Yes! In other words, it's both. And that is important. Some churches, like the Baptist church where I grew up, emphasize only the future dimension of the Kingdom of God. Their members might have a license plate that reads, "W84GSUS." Can you figure it out? "Wait for Jesus," because that's all we can do in their view! They see the powerful grip that evil has on so many human institutions, and believe that only a dramatic intervention by God can really change anything. And that, conveniently, absolves them of doing anything to make this world a more just place. So, in my home church, we never heard a word about Christian responsibilities with regard to great moral issues of that day- like the Civil Rights movement and the War in Viet Nam. A fixation on the future Kingdom of God ignores much of what the Bible teaches about God's expectation that his people will work for peace and justice and compassionate treatment of the poor and the immigrant in the here and now.

On the other hand, some mainline churches have emphasized the present dimension of the Kingdom of God to the exclusion of its future dimension. They are overly optimistic about our ability to reform the world, not taking the power of evil seriously enough. And, consequently, they are subject to burnout and disillusionment as social ills stubbornly persist.

So, we would do well to keep the biblical tension between the present and future dimensions of God's Kingdom. As we look forward to the full future inbreaking of the Kingdom of God, we have hope and confidence that ultimately, evil will not prevail, and that God will reclaim this world that is rightfully his.

A father turned on the TV so his five year-old daughter could watch her favorite cartoon. When he turned on the show, there was a mean character threatening "the good guys." His daughter told him not to worry. "It's not good now, but it will be good at the end." That's the hope of the future dimension of God's Kingdom. The world may not be good right now, but it will be good at the end.

And in the meantime, there is work to be done, work that can make a tremendous difference in the lives of millions of people. In fact, a recent article in the Washington Post outlines how, surprisingly, the world is becoming a better place for the majority of its inhabitants. Did you know that starvation-level poverty has decreased by 80% since 1970? 80%! And, using the "Legatum Prosperity Index," researchers found that 148 out of 167 countries have seen net progress in the last ten years. Part of this global improvement is because of the work of followers of Jesus all around the world.

Paul “Bear” Bryant was one of the greatest college football coaches of all time. His teams piled up 322 wins, with 29 of his teams going to bowl games. His record at Alabama in the 1960’s and 70’s was 193 wins, 32 losses, and 5 ties! In one of his pre-game speeches, he said this, “In this game, there are going to be four or five plays that will determine the outcome of this contest. Four or five plays that will swing the momentum toward us, or away from us. I don’t know which plays these will be. You don’t know which plays these will be. All you can do is go out there and give all that you have on each and every play. If you are doing that on one of those crucial plays, and you catch your opponent giving less, that play will swing things in our direction. And if we rise to the occasion like that, on those four or five plays, we are gonna leave here today a winner.”

I think that’s true of our role in the world. You may perform a simple act of kindness and mercy that profoundly affects another person in ways you can’t anticipate or begin to imagine. We might begin ministries that take place at just the right time and blossom into something that could touch thousands of people. We could work for changes in government policy that could edge millions of people toward a more just way of living. And at some time, at just the right time, Jesus will return and bring all our work to fruition.