

Sunday Lesson – December 19, 2021

GOSPEL: Luke 1: 39-55

“Blessed Among Women”

Context

“Having learned from the angel that she will give birth to the Son of God, Mary hurries to visit her pregnant relative Elizabeth in the hill country. The intimate conversation that follows portrays Jesus as more important than John. It also shows God already at work to overturn the world’s structures and expectations. The spotlight shines on Mary and Elizabeth, two lowly and shamed ones through whom God has chosen to begin the transformation of the world.” *(Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-139-45-46-55-3)*

Insight

“Women — often overlooked or ignored both in society at large and in biblical narratives — have the only speaking roles. Mary’s first words prompt an immediate, silent, response from Elizabeth’s unborn child. John leaps, acknowledging both her presence and the significance of the child she carries in her womb. John’s reaction to Mary’s voice fulfills Gabriel’s prophecy, “even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Luke 1:15). Already John points to the coming one.

Mary is blessed not only for her status as the mother of the Lord, but also for her trust in God’s promise. Our English translations obscure the fact that Elizabeth uses more than one word for “blessed.” When she pronounces Mary “blessed ... among women” and proclaims that the fruit of Mary’s womb is blessed, she uses the term *eulogemene/os*, which emphasizes that both present and future generations will praise and speak well of her and her child. But when she says, “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was



spoken to her by the Lord” (v. 45), she uses the word *makaria*, the same term that Jesus uses to bless people in the Beatitudes. We might well translate Elizabeth’s words as “Happy is she who believed ... ” Mary is blessed because despite all expectations her social status has been reversed: she will be honored rather than shamed for bearing this child. But she has also been blessed with divine joy — with beatitude — because she has believed that God is able to do what God promises to do.” *(Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-139-45-46-55-3)*

Gospel Reading

“Mary didn’t waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah’s house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly,

You’re so blessed among women,
and the babe in your womb, also blessed!
And why am I so blessed that
the mother of my Lord visits me?
The moment the sound of your
greeting entered my ears,
The babe in my womb
skipped like a lamb for sheer joy.
Blessed woman, who believed what God said,
believed every word would come true!
And Mary said,
I’m bursting with God-news;
I’m dancing the song of my Savior God.
God took one good look at me, and look what happened—
I’m the most fortunate woman on earth!
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,
the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.
His mercy flows in wave after wave

on those who are in awe before him.
He bared his arm and showed his strength,
scattered the bluffing braggarts.
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,
pulled victims out of the mud.
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
the callous rich were left out in the cold.
He embraced his chosen child, Israel;
he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.
It's exactly what he promised,
beginning with Abraham and right up to now." The Message

What It Could Mean?

"This canticle spoken by Mary is called the Magnificat--"My soul/being **magnifies** the Lord." There are two keys to understanding the Magnificat's proclamation of salvation. First, the canticle is a prophetic celebration of the fact that Elizabeth's declaration confirms the fulfilment of what the angel promised: Her son "will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David" (1:32). So, this ecstatic speech is a prophecy of what God will do through Christ.

Second, Mary speaks of God's actions in the past tense: God **looked**, **did** great things for me, **showed** strength, **scattered** the proud, **brought** down the powerful, **lifted** up the lowly, **filled** the hungry, **sent** the rich away empty, and **helped** Israel.

Thus, we see that the Magnificat is a paradoxical prophecy. It speaks of a future God will bring in through the yet-to-be-born messiah using past tense verbs. There is a sense, then, in which Luke is proclaiming that already at the point of awaiting the coming of the messiah, salvation is a done deal.

The paradox of the Magnificat is the paradox of our faith. This is the "already" (past tense verbs) and "not yet" (hope for the future) of biblical eschatology. Already the reign of God has arrived, but when we look around at the world we plead that

God's reign might yet come. Is not this the paradox of Advent itself: Christ already came (born, preached, healed, opposed the powers-that-be, died, resurrected, and ascended) and yet we begin the Christian year waiting, preparing, and hoping for him to come?

At the center of the paradox is the concern for **why** Jesus came/is coming. As the beginning of the Magnificat that focused on the reversal of Mary's situation cannot be separated from the latter portion that focused on systems of power being reversed, our salvation is part and parcel of the saving of the world.

Following Luke, the Christian faith is concerned at the ultimate level with the reversal of the systems of oppression that keep some on top by putting others on the bottom. **This**, says the first prophet in Luke-Acts, is why Jesus came/is coming. **This**, suggests Mary, is what we are to preach, celebrate, and for which we hope in Advent with Christmas just around the corner."

(Excerpts from workerpreacher.org; Revised Common Lectionary by O. Wesley Allen, Jr.)

Readings for Further Study

- **1 Samuel 2: 1-10** *Hannah's Prayer*
- **Matthew 6: 19-21** *God's desire is for us to set our hearts on things above*
- **Psalms 80: 1-7** *Often read along with Luke 1: 39-55*

Thought for the Day

"Luther identifies six works of God in the Magnificat: mercy, breaking spiritual pride, putting down the mighty, exalting the lowly, authoring trust and giving good things (what he usually identifies as "life, forgiveness and salvation")." ~ *Excerpts from livinglutheran.org/2018/08/mary-mother-of-our-lord/*

A Prayer

Holy God, as we open your Word to study Elizabeth and Mary, open our eyes to see you, our ears to listen for you, and our hearts to perceive the ways you are at work in us and in the world. **Amen.**