

*Brought down, lifted up*

Feast of St. Mary the Virgin – The Assumption – August 15, 2021

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

The Rev. Patrick Raymond

Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” - Luke 1:46-55

The gospel passage that we just heard is among the most familiar and beloved in all of Scripture. The Holy One has drawn near to Mary, overshadowed her, made far-reaching promises. All of this is seen and confirmed by Elizabeth, Mary’s older kinswoman, giving rise to Mary’s beautiful offering.

“*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior ...*”

Due to her joy and lyricism, we could easily miss Mary’s profound theology. She bears witness to a God who is not only Almighty but also personal, even intimate: ... *the Mighty One has done great things for me*. And having named God as savior she is already reframing her personal story in a far larger context. *From generation to generation*, there have been those who have seen our human need for and called upon a power greater than ourselves, to save us from the plague of our self-serving human illusions, and so much more.

So far so good. But soon Mary implicates and disrupts our human notions of God, and who may be in or out of favor. *God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant*. In this instance, and maybe more often than we know, God bypasses the seminary and the bishop’s office, the CEO’s corner office and the country club. God is instead becoming known to and in and through an unknown, small town teenage girl.

And this is only the beginning! Mary later goes on to claim that this same God *has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

If Mary were a rector, and if she were to preach these same words on any sabbath or holy day, I can imagine scowls at the door afterward. In days to follow she would receive messages, some from the congregation's biggest donors, advising her that she had wrongly and dangerously veered into politics.

*"We come here for God, and not to hear you're prejudiced social commentary. You should keep things spiritual."*

*"We liked the part about 'God my Savior,' but do you have any idea all the good that rich people do? How can you say that God sends them away, sends them away empty?" And, How can God fill the hungry with good things for free – without making them work for it? What 'those people' need is a jobs program."*

How can you and I *not* be provoked by this prayer and declaration of Mary? How can we, especially those of us who are privileged, *not* wonder about what we call our faith and what we call our politics and the complicated connections, or disconnections, between our faith and our politics?

Some of you may rightly wonder why I've not paid any attention to the Assumption of Mary into heaven, celebrated today by many of us here and by catholic Christians around the world. Yes! We should celebrate it! We should keep in mind and take to heart that the heaven into which Mary was assumed. And doing so, we should consider Mary's own witness and declaration. She's makes clear that the heaven into which we say she has been assumed cannot be divorced from this world. As she herself did, we are to recognize, make, show and choose that heaven here on earth, for God's sake, by all that we say and do.

In addition to being among the most familiar and beloved passages in all of scripture, these words of Mary are also among the most recited. Some of us here have said or sung the Magnificat daily, as part of our evening prayers, hundreds or even thousands of times.

Whether for the first time or the ten thousandth, we always put ourselves at risk when we pray Mary's words as our own.

Some of us run the risk of familiarity. The words can become dulled by so many repetitions.

We run the risk of confining the message to ancient times and a girl named Mary, shielding ourselves from asking how God the savior is seeking us out, to save, bless or disrupt us.

We risk attaching ourselves to the words of God's hopeful, reassuring favor while disregarding the *uncomfortable* words.

When we best pray these words of Mary, we give thanks for her, we rejoice with her, and the words come alive in us. They lead us to ask how in this still-broken world God is angling to be born and made known in and through us. *Amen.*