

Threshold of the Turning

Fourth Sunday of Advent

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Scripture

Luke 1:26b-55

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowly state 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;
indeed, 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 imagination 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 come to the aid of his child Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Sermon

Here we are on the threshold of Christmas Eve. The Fourth Sunday of Advent in the morning, then later Christmas Eve. When one becomes the other is not exactly clear. But what is clear is that there will be a turn. The coming of Christ always brings about a turning in our lives and in the world. Mary knew this perhaps more than anyone. She knew that with the birth of her son, nothing would ever be the same again.

Against all the nostalgia and sentimentality associated with Christmas outside these walls, "dreaming of white Christmases/Just like the ones I used to know," the Church needs to remember that Christ's birth marks a radical inbreaking of something new. The arrival of this New Age means the complete upending of the status quo; his birth signals the grand reversal of everything, the dismantling of the powers that be, and extends a new horizon of hope, healing, and meaning for all people. Remember what Simeon said to Mary, when Jesus was twelve, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:34-35).

This "turn" is beautifully captured in Mary's Song, the Magnificat. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior..." (Luke 1:47). Echoing the prayer of Hannah, the prophetess, in 1 Samuel, Mary's response of praise boldly declares what the birth of Jesus means for her and the world, especially the rich, the proud, and the powerful. By quoting Hannah's prayer, Luke wants us to see Mary as a prophetess of liberation who sings a song of high revolt against the powers, who sings of the power of God that provides for the powerless. My dear friend, Frank Jehle, who was a Reformed pastor and theologian in St. Gallen, Switzerland, who died just over a year ago, described Mary's Song as a "New Testament psalm." I really like this because it ties the New Testament with the Hebrew scriptures. In many respects, the entire Old Testament is summarized in Mary's Song. It's a distillation of all 150 psalms. [1]

"My soul doth magnify the Lord," sings the King James Version, "and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior. For God hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden." (Luke

1:46-48a). Martin Luther (1483-1546) loved the Magnificat. In his commentary on these verses, from 1521, Luther said, "The stress should not be on the 'low estate' but on the word 'regarded.' [Mary's] low estate is not to be praised, but God's regard, as when a prince gives his hand to a beggar, the meanness of the beggar is not to be praised, but the graciousness and goodness of the prince. The evil eye looks only on the reward and the result of the humility. True humility does not know that it is humble."

And contained in his commentary is this prayer to Mary, which might assault one's Protestant sensibilities:

"O blessed Virgin and Mother of God,
how very little and lowly
were you esteemed,
and yet God looked upon you
with abundant graces and riches
and has done great things for you.
Indeed, you were not at all worthy of this.
But high and wide, above and beyond your merit,
is the rich, overflowing grace of God in you.
How good, how blessed are you
for all eternity, from the moment
you found such a God!"

Luther is, obviously, putting the stress on the mercy of God and moving the focus away from Mary's "low estate." My sense is that Luther wants to remove any notion that God was merciful because Mary chose to lower her estate, that she chose to lower herself, chose humility. And you can easily see how elevating Mary's "low estate," celebrating lowliness, making oneself low, putting oneself down, being submissive, unfortunately sacralizes this behavior and turns this way of being into a Christian virtue, which it isn't (at least, not always). This has been detrimental for many, especially for women. It wasn't because Mary chose to put herself down that God regarded her; God regarded her first. Grace always comes first.

And, if we really listen to this text, really take to heart its message, we see that the Mary of the Magnificat is not meek and mild. She's not celebrating her lowliness, she's not praising a God who's commending her for being low; instead, she's praising the God who regarded her low estate, who had compassion toward her, and empathy, who sees her oppression, a God who sees her poverty, a God who sees her destitution, a God who sees her powerlessness—and has come to do something about it. Martin Luther said, "God's work and God's eyes are in the depths, but man's [eyes are] only in the height." God sees Mary, in the depths of her existence. God sees her. She's no longer invisible, as she was to the rich and powerful and arrogant.

Yes, the Magnificat is a song of praise. And there's reason to rejoice. But the Magnificat is also a song of protest—which is also a reason to rejoice. Mary's response of praise boldly

declares what the birth of Jesus meant for her and for her world, especially the wealthy, the proud, and the powerful. It's right there in the song. His birth signals God's grand reversal, it announces the great undoing, the falling and rising of many. The halls of power, the kingdoms and governments and economic systems of this earth should tremble at his coming. His birth puts the prevailing ways of the world on edge. For, as Mary sang, he will scatter the proud, he will bring down the powerful from their thrones, and lift up the lowly—the lowly that have been put down, pressed down to the bottom by society by those at the top; God will fill the hungry with good things, and will send the rich away empty, disappointed (Luke 1:51-53). The word for rich in the Magnificat is a form of the Greek verb *plouteo*, meaning, "to be very rich." Mega-rich. It's the root of the word plutocracy, a form of oligarchy, a society ruled or controlled by a small minority of its wealthiest citizens. So, we could say, Jesus will send the plutocrats away empty.

This—all of this—is why Mary's rejoicing, because this one, this Jesus, this Yeshua, whose name means "Yahweh saves" will save us from all that binds and enslaves us—not by taking us out of the world and bringing us to heaven. This child will save us here and now from the power of sin and all that separates us from God, our neighbor and ourselves; he will release us, liberate us from all that oppresses and dehumanizes us, everything that causes us to be fearful and anxious—here, now, in this life, where we live.

This is what his birth means for us. There's nothing sentimental about it. And, this means that when we say, "Merry Christmas," this greeting, which contains a variety of meanings and wishes these days, should at the very least include the wish that someone experience in their own life what the birth of Jesus meant to Mary, the turning of the world and therefore a reason to sing.

The contemporary hymn setting of the Magnificat, [*Canticle of the Turning*](#), which we sang last Sunday, captures the full meaning his birth, the meaning of the turn:

*My soul cries out with a joyful shout
that the God of my heart is great,
And my spirit sings of the wondrous things
that you bring to the one who waits.
You fixed your sight on the servant's plight,
and my weakness you did not spurn,
So from east to west shall my name be blest.
Could the world be about to turn?
My heart shall sing of the day you bring.
Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,
and the world is about to turn. [2]*

Here on the threshold of the turning, Mary invites us to sing. May her song be our song. *Merry Christmas!*

Sources

- [1] Dr. Frank Jehle. From his Advent sermon/*Weihnachtspost*, 2017.
- [2] Roy Cooney, *Canticle of the Turning*, set to the tune STAR OF THE COUNTY DOWN.