

ADVENT 2019

Part 3: "The Magnificat"

Luke 1:39-56

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Sunday, December 15, 2019 (The Third Sunday of Advent)

Scripture Reading

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And 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 mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home (Luke 1:39–56, ESV).

Heavenly Father, thank you for the good news of your Son Jesus. We thank you for your goodness, your power, your holiness, your wisdom, your justice, and your faithfulness. May your Holy Spirit reveal Jesus to our hearts so that we would magnify his name and worship him with joy. We pray this in the mighty name of Jesus, our Savior. AMEN.

Introduction

Today is the third Sunday of Advent season. Advent is a season during which the people of God have set aside to emphasize the hope of God's coming kingdom. We are a people called to yearn and long for the day that God fulfills his promise to make all things new. Advent is a season wherein we acknowledge the brokenness of our sin-fractured world, and we set our ultimate hope on King Jesus.

During the last few weeks, we have been reviewing the first chapter of the gospel, according to Luke. During the Spring of 2020, Lord-willing, our church family, will be

looking at the ending of Luke, so, before then, I thought it would be helpful to look back at the beginning.

Thus far, in this chapter, we have seen two angelic birth announcements concerning two very important people. Elizabeth is an older woman married to a priest named Zechariah. She was thought to be barren and unable to have children but is now pregnant with a little boy named John. History will remember her son as John the Baptist. He will be the last and the greatest of all the prophets of the Old Testament era.¹ John is to prepare the way of the Lord.

Secondly, Mary, a virgin girl from Nazareth of Galilee, is now miraculously pregnant with a child who will be Jesus Christ. Jesus is Immanuel, the Messiah, the Son of Man, the Son of God, and Immanuel – God with us.

In our text today, these two amazing women now encounter one another. They are two women who are now pregnant with children through unlikely and miraculous power. They are two women who hold unbelievable and history-shaping truth in their hearts. They are two women who have suddenly find themselves wrapped up in God's glorious plan of redemption.

As they greet one another, there is a sudden recognition, a supernatural revelation of the significance of the children within their wombs. And this beautiful moment is followed by one of the most beautiful songs of glory and worship in the Bible. It is a song called "The Magnificat," so-named, because in the Latin translation of this text, Mary's first word in this song is "Magnificat," meaning, "my soul magnifies the Lord!"²

As we walk through this beautiful text today, I want to look at three themes within this passage that we want to remember in this Advent season. We are going to look at **1.) The Spirit of God, 2.) The Justice of God, and 3.) The Faithfulness of God.**

Exposition

1.) The Spirit of God

One of the central doctrines of Christianity is that we believe God is Triune. God exists as a Trinity. There are three persons in one God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Of the four gospel accounts, Luke tends to have a pronounced emphasis on the ministry of God the Holy Spirit. Before John the Baptist is conceived, the angel tells his father that he will be filled with the Holy Spirit (Lk. 1:15). Later, the same angel tells Mary that Jesus will be conceived because the Holy Spirit will overshadow her (Lk. 1:35). In our text today, the Holy Spirit is again emphasized. ***"In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of***

¹ By Old Testament era, I mean the age of the old covenant, as opposed to the "new covenant" that was prophesied in Jer. 31 and inaugurated in Jesus Christ.

² Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 14.

Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!'" (Luke 1:39–42, ESV).

These few verses are fascinating for several reasons. Firstly, this is a set of verses that affirms the full humanity, personhood, and dignity of children who are still in the womb. Even though John the Baptist hasn't even been born yet, he is beginning to step into his God-ordained destiny to point other people to the glory and worthiness of Jesus.

Secondly, even though John is not born yet, he recognizes Jesus, he is near to Jesus. He leaps for joy within Elizabeth's womb the moment she hears Mary's voice. And suddenly, Elizabeth, too, is filled with the Spirit.

This is, in a way, a perfect microcosm of John's ministry. John is meant to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. He is meant to recognize Jesus. And then, he is meant to get out of the way, so that all of the glory goes to Jesus. And John will say about Jesus later in his ministry, *"He must increase, but I must decrease"* (John 3:30, ESV).

However, it is important to realize the only reason John is able to recognize Jesus for who he is – even in the womb – is because the ministry of John the Baptist is empowered by and dependent on the Holy Spirit.

So just as much as this moment is a microcosm of the ministry of the John the Baptist, it is also the microcosm of the continuing ministry of the Holy Spirit.

When Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, she rejoices. And when we truly see Jesus, when we recognize him as the Spirit reveals him to us, the response is not dispassionate. The response is joy and gratitude, and worship.

What does this mean for us in this Advent season? It means we need the Holy Spirit to reveal Jesus to us in order for us to truly know and worship him. It means we need to pray for the Spirit to reveal the gospel to those that don't yet know Jesus. It means we need to pray for the church to be empowered by the Spirit to point all glory to Jesus.

2.) The Justice of God

Let's take a look at Mary's song again, *"And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And 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 mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty'" (Luke 1:46–53, ESV).*

Mary is truly and an extraordinary woman. Last week, we saw Mary as a profound example of faith. This text shows us that Mary is also a profound example of humility.

We typically understand that humility is the opposite of pride, and this is partially true. True humility is not arrogance, selfishness, or self-centeredness. But neither is true humility self-hatred or self-deprecation. *True humility is a view of self that is neither too high or too low. It is a way of life where our thoughts of self are outshone by the overwhelming light of God.*

Mary embodies this true humility. Mary's song is not about primarily herself. It is a song that proclaims the attributes of God. The Magnificat is a celebration of the goodness, the mightiness, the holiness, the mercy, the wisdom, and – most of all – the justice of God.

Justice is the dominant theme. Justice is the idea that God will one day put things to right. In fact, the promise of God's justice is so certain that it is talked about in the prophetic past tense.³

In the world of men, the ruthless, the greedy, the vicious are those who are exalted. The proud and the power get what they want, and the weak are usually taken advantage of and trampled in the process. This was the case in the ancient world, and it is still the case now.

Mary's song is a celebration that God's grace is given to the humble. Mary is a small-town teenage girl in the age of Caesar Augustus and the Roman Empire. She represents all that is weak in this world. Yet God has exalted her to become the mother of Jesus Christ.

Mary's song then moves from the idea of individual justice to cosmic justice. What God has done for Mary, he will do for the whole world in Jesus. God's kingdom will exalt the hungry and the broken, and he will humble those who use power for their own glory. Jesus will be the judge of the living and the dead who will right all wrongs.

Advent is a season that reminds us as the people of God too long for the justice of God. We are to see the brokenness of the world and yearn for the day when God puts the world to rights. We are called to bear witness to the justice of God in our values and in our life *as part of our worship to God*. Here are the words of Isaiah the prophet: *"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your*

³The tense of the verb (and the following verbs) is best understood as a futuristic aorist or the equivalent of the prophetic perfect in Hebrew. It describes the future work of God's Son with the certainty of a past event. Mary saw as already accomplished what God would do through her son." Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 93.

righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard” (Isaiah 58:6–8, ESV).

With this said, it is important to know that we cannot bring about total justice in our own power. True justice is something that only king Jesus will bring. But we can bear witness to it; our lives are to bear witness to the kingdom that is coming.

I recently read C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, Witch, and the Wardrobe* to my sons. In this book, there are four children who enter an enchanted world named Narnia. This realm of Narnia is under the reign of the wicked White Witch, who placed the entire land under a spell of everlasting winter.

But when the true king of Narnia begins to return, even before anyone actually sees that king, the ice and the snow begin to melt. The birds begin to sing. And the trees begin to sprout.

There is still brokenness in the world, but because of Jesus’s entry to the world, the ice has begun to melt. When the church of Jesus Christ begins to display the grace of God in our lives and actions, we are bearing witness to the kingdom that is coming.

3.) The Faithfulness of God

Let’s look at the end of Mary’s song: *“He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever”* (Luke 1:54–55, ESV).

Here Mary is giving us an inspired interpretation of what is happening to both herself and Elizabeth and their respective babies. All of what is happening is happening because God is faithful to the promise he made to the ancient ancestor of all Israelites – Abraham.

In Genesis, we see that God is the Creator. He created the heavens and the earth by the power of his words. He created man and woman to bear his image and to rule and reign over creation. But rather than serving and worshipping God the Creator, mankind chose to worship creation. We turned inward and tried to find our fulfillment in cheap God-substitutes like power, sex, money, success, and comfort. In so doing, we fractured God’s good creation and brought sin into the world. But rather than abandoning his creation to death and decay, God initiated a great rescue operation by making a promise – specifically, by making a covenant – with a man named Abraham and his family. By blessing and multiplying Abraham’s family, God promised to reveal himself to the world and bring the blessing of redemption.

And this covenant was extraordinary and miraculous by its very nature. As many of you may know, God made this promise to Abraham at a time when he was childless. This led to a very mysterious and profound even in Genesis 15. Here Abraham asked God, *“How do I know that you will be faithful to your promise?”* God’s response was to command Abraham to gather various animals – a cow, a goat, a sheep, and a few birds – and then

slaughter them. Thus, Abraham divided the bigger animals' bodies into two pieces and made a pathway between them.

Now, most modern readers would see this event simply as a random display of ancient animal cruelty. Somebody called PETA! However, ancient readers and listeners would have thought of something else. They would have recognized that this was a covenantal ceremony.

Often times, when a covenant was made between a great king and a lesser king. The lesser king would sacrifice an animal, and walk between the two halves of its body. This was a physical sign of what would happen to the lesser king if he dared to rebel against the great king.

But in the case of Abraham, something profound and unexpected happens. In the darkness of night, God walks through the sacrifice himself. O. Palmer Robertson explains the significance of this imagery: *"By dividing animals and passing between the pieces, participants in a covenant pledged themselves to life and death. These actions established an oath of malediction. If they should break the covenant, they were asking that their own bodies be torn in pieces just as the animals had been divided ceremonially...In the case of the Abrahamic covenant, God the Creator binds himself to man the creature by a solemn-blood oath. The Almighty chooses to commit himself to the fulfillment of promises spoken to Abraham... God has solemnly promised, and has sealed that promise with a self-maledictory oath."*⁴

That self-valedictory oath – that curse – was fulfilled the day that God's son Jesus was crucified on a cross in our place. That's how serious God is about being faithful to his promises. God is saying, "I am so committing to my promises that even if it causes me to be slaughtered for the sake of my people, I will be faithful!"

The greatest hope that we can ever know is that God is a God who keeps his promises. Because God is faithful, we can trust him. Because God is faithful, we can cry out to Him in prayer. Because God is faithful, we can have hope for a good future. And because God is faithful, we can rejoice in amazement that despite our constant failures, despite our inconsistency, God is a God of steadfast, relentless, persistent love. God is faithfully committed to his covenant, even if he is the one who must pay the cost with his own blood!

Mary shows us the only right response to this God. The correct response is singing. The correct response is rejoicing. The correct response is worshipping the glorious God of this gospel!

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we be filled with his Spirit so that we would point all glory to Jesus! May our souls magnify the Lord! May we long for the justice of God and the day he makes all things new! May we rest in the truth that our God is faithful! AMEN.

⁴ O. Palmer Robertson. *The Christ of the Covenants*. 130-131.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1.) *Read Luke 1:39-56. In your own words, summarize what is happening in this passage.*
- 2.) *Luke's gospel places a unique emphasis on the Holy Spirit. What does Lk. 1:39-45 teach us about the Holy Spirit?*
- 3.) *What does Mary's song – "The Magnificat"—reveal about God's relationship with the humble and the proud? How might this song both challenge and encourage us?*
- 4.) *In Lk. 1:54-55, Mary shows us that Jesus's coming is a response to God's promise to Abraham (see Gen. 12:1-3). Why is it so comforting to know that God is faithful to keep his promises?*