

Sermon on Luke 1:46-55
Pastor David Wietzke
4th Sunday in Advent (C)
December 23, 2018



And Mary said:

*"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers." (Luke 1:46-55)*

Ponder the grace of God who lifts up the lowly

This week I saw an editorial that was printed in the New York Times. The title was, "Would human extinction be a tragedy?"¹ Now you might think that this would be a fairly obvious "yes"—that the elimination of the human race would be a pretty bad thing. But the author of the editorial has mixed feelings about all this; mainly because of all the pain and suffering he feels we are inflicting on the animal kingdom (and for the author, animals and humans are practically indistinguishable.) So, he ponders, if by means of climate change or nuclear war we annihilate ourselves maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing after all in the grand scheme of things.

Now if you are like me you probably have some pretty strong disagreements with this author. I happen to think that annihilating the human race would be a pretty unequivocally bad thing—not that this is going to happen by human hands. It is still God's world, and even the worst that humanity can do—and we can do a lot of harm—is still subject to God's overarching rule and control.

But before we write this author's thought off as nothing but gloomy silliness, maybe we should ponder again what God says about this world. Wasn't it God himself who said at the time of the flood that he was appalled and grieved that he had even made humanity, because of the evil that is so prevalent in the human heart—and almost did wipe it out at that time? Wasn't it God who said in the book of Isaiah, "The Lord was displeased that there was no justice, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene"? (Isaiah 59:15-16) Wasn't it

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/17/opinion/human-extinction-climate-change.html>

God himself who declared that the just penalty of sin was death, and that we were all sinners--so that the death of the human race would be an entirely appropriate sentence based on God's own justice in his Word?

But what we are celebrating this week is that God in his mercy did not bring on us the destruction that we and all people deserved. Instead he sent his one and only Son into the world to save fallen humanity, to give us new life on earth and a better life in a better world to come, where the curse of sin and death will be no more.

And what better way to praise God than by pondering the words of the one who was more intimately connected with the coming of that child than anyone--his mother Mary. IN today's Gospel reading you heard the song of Mary, sometimes known as the "Magnificat", the longest speech we have from Mary in the Bible. Let her praise be ours as we too **PONDER THE GRACE OF GOD WHO LIFTS UP THE LOWLY.**

I. Praise God for his individual mercy to you

Mary began by praising God for the very personal blessings he was giving to her.

***"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.***

We don't often think about it, but there is no doubt that the angel's message to Mary probably meant a great deal of turmoil in her life. One of the unanswered questions about the Christmas story is whether or to whom Mary shared the message of what the angel had told her. We do know that there was a time when her betrothed, Joseph, was inclined to end their relationship because of her presumed unfaithfulness (until God himself gave him a message to the contrary). Was it because she didn't tell him or that he didn't believe her? Either way, from a purely earthly point of view this miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit surely led some people to accuse her of the worst sort of behavior.

But Mary was not concerned with the earthly point of view. She took God's view--that this was an incredible miracle, and that she was unspeakably privileged to have this role to play in it! She praised God for his goodness to her. (By the way, when we hear Mary call God her "Savior" we are reminded that she belongs among the saved, that she is not a Savior or co-Redeemer herself as some Christians have so wrongly imagined). But she prophesies that for the rest of this world's history she would be known to be uniquely blessed, that she was the one God was using to bring his Son into the world.

God gave great personal blessings to Mary in the coming of Jesus. And God has given great and personal blessings to you in that same birth. For you too are among those he came to

save. You are a member of the same human race which he joined in Mary's womb--a blood relative (no matter how distant, yet still true) of the eternal Son of God. You are one that God foreknew from eternity and loved in spite of your fallen nature, your often tactless words, your failures and your wrong desires. It was your individual sins that Jesus assumed responsibility for when he came into the world, and especially as he went to the cross in your place. It was your own name spoken at your baptism that God heard and declared that he was making you his child--again, all because Jesus Christ was born to win the salvation that God has delivered to you.

Like Mary, being Jesus' follower may sometimes bring turmoil into your life too. It can make your life harder. It can disrupt your relationships. But we can take God's view--that the coming of Jesus to bring you eternal salvation is always something that deserves praise and thanks, no matter what else transpires!

II. Praise God for his mercy to all his people

And then we look around and see that these personal blessings to you are also part of a gift that is for so many more. Mary sang:

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

There's an old saying (and not a very good one) that declares: "God helps those who help themselves." I guess it's intended to keep people from being lazy, encouraging us to work hard to gain what can be had. But it's a pretty misleading saying, isn't it? For the whole point of Mary's song in these verses is to declare that God comes to the help of those who *can't* help themselves. Over and over again she sang: God tears down the strong and proud and lifts up the lowly and humble.

This would come true in Jesus' birth. King Herod and the Jewish leaders and the rich and wealthy would miss out on its splendor. It was left to Mary and Joseph--ordinary, rather poor people from what we can tell--to be a part of this event, along with the shepherds in the fields who saw the angels sing and saw the child in the manger. Still today God's Word is often scorned by the wealthy and powerful and yet its promises of forgiveness and eternal life are eagerly heard and clung to by so many who are sick, struggling, and poor.

Which are you? And the key to answering that question is not how much money you have in the bank. It's how you see yourself in your relationship with God. Are you **"proud in your inmost thoughts"** as Mary put it? Do you feel that you are the ruler of your own life, proud of what you have gained and achieved? Or do you see yourself as a poor sinner in need of grace? A mortal helplessly doomed to the grave from which only God in love can rescue you? A soul that is hungry to know God and his love?

We know that one day it is God's plan to come to right all the wrongs, that this world of sin and evil is not God's last word. But all this was connected with the birth of Jesus. It was because of him that God can bring salvation to the repentant, humbled sinner. It's by believing that he truly came as God in the flesh that we are saved and receive the forgiveness he came to bring, and we receive a new heart and spirit within us. And so to poor suffering sinners everywhere, we bring the good news that God has done for them what they could never do for themselves.

Conclusion

We all want to make this world a better place. in some limited but very important ways we get to do this. We are called to bring blessings into the lives of others, and as God gives us the ability we are glad to do this.

But we also know that despite our efforts, this world will continue to be a world of sin and pain and trouble, where the weak are exploited by the strong and God's created world itself groans as if in labor, as Paul once said (Romans 8:22) There are many problems of life in this world that are beyond our ability to cure.

Only God can save. And at the birth of Jesus we see his hand at work--removing sin, comforting the guilty, giving hope, promising eternal blessings that he alone can fulfill and pointing us to the new world to come. Mary sang it, and we share her faith and her joy.

Praise the one who came to help the lowly and helpless. He kept his ancient promise. He showed mercy to sinners like you. For that wondrous act of his incarnation in the virgin's womb, to Jesus Christ our only Savior be all praise and glory, this Christmas and forevermore!