

December 19, 2021

## 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 2:1-10

Hannah prayed and said,  
‘My heart exults in the LORD;  
my strength is exalted in my God.  
My mouth derides my enemies,  
because I rejoice in my victory.  
‘There is no Holy One like the LORD,  
no one besides you;  
there is no Rock like our God.  
Talk no more so very proudly,  
let not arrogance come from your mouth;  
for the LORD is a God of knowledge,  
and by him actions are weighed.  
The bows of the mighty are broken,  
but the feeble gird on strength.  
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,  
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.  
The barren has borne seven,  
but she who has many children is forlorn.  
The LORD kills and brings to life;  
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.  
The LORD makes poor and makes rich;  
he brings low, he also exalts.  
He raises up the poor from the dust;  
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,  
to make them sit with princes  
and inherit a seat of honour.  
For the pillars of the earth are the LORD’s,  
and on them he has set the world.

‘He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,  
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;  
for not by might does one prevail.  
The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered;  
the Most High will thunder in heaven.  
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;

he will give strength to his king,  
and exalt the power of his anointed.'

### Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in  
God my Saviour,

for God has looked with favour 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  
God's name.

God's mercy is for those who trust the LORD  
from generation to generation.

God has shown strength with the Divine arm;

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

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;

God has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

God has helped God's servant Israel,  
in remembrance of Divine mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and Sarah  
to God descendants for ever.'

These familiar words of Mary are an option in every Advent cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary,<sup>1</sup> so if you have attended pre-Christmas services for a few years you will probably have heard them spoken, read them responsively, and maybe even sung them. There are few biblical texts, in fact, which have been more frequently set to music. Mary's Song is often referred to as the Magnificat, which is the first word of the Latin phrase which English translates as "My soul magnifies". Lesser-known facts about Mary's Song include some of the following.

- The Magnificat has been part of the Church's liturgy since its earliest days. For centuries, members of religious orders have recited or sung these words on a daily basis.
- It is the longest set of words spoken by a woman in the New Testament.
- It is also the first Christmas carol ever composed.<sup>2</sup>

There is one more wonderful piece of trivia relating to the Magnificat, and I will get to that later in the sermon.

This morning I will explore the Magnificat from the perspective of biblical studies, theology, and application. Biblical studies ought to impact theology, and both ought to shape the manner in which we live. With this in mind I will touch on some of the treasures and stories which have come up in my reflection on the text.

Mary's song of praise bears striking resemblance to Hannah's song in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 2:1-10.<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew of Hannah's song is different than the Greek of Mary's song, but there are significant themes they share.

- Both Hannah and Mary are giving birth to their firstborn sons.
- Hannah's heart exults in God and Mary's heart magnifies the Lord.
- The proud are mentioned in both passages, and contrasted with God's care of the feeble (1<sup>st</sup> Sam) and lowly (Luke).
- In both passages the powerful are brought low and the needy are lifted up.
- The hungry and satiated experience a reversal of fortunes in each song.
- Hannah's boy Samuel becomes a prophet who anoints King David; Jesus is of David's line and in some Gospels he is anointed by a prophet;<sup>4</sup> in Luke's gospel he takes on the title of King of the Jews (23:3).

There are several different theological directions a person could go from textual comparisons of the Magnificat with Hannah's song. It strikes me that Mary, or at the least the author of Luke's gospel, looked to the stories and language of her

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<sup>1</sup> *The Lectionary Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 3<sup>rd</sup> Advent in Year A & 4<sup>th</sup> Advent in Years B & C.

<sup>2</sup> Jason Porterfield, <http://enemylove.com/subversive-magnificat-mary-expected-messiah-to-be-like>.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Culpepper's, *Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections on the Gospel of Luke* in "The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes—volume 9 (Nashville, TH: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> See commentaries on Mark 14:3-9.

sacred texts to make sense of a truly shocking development in her life. God not only cares for the lowly, but works through them for the healing of people, our tribes, and the world. Young women and barren couples are no obstacle for the Divine. Such was Hannah's experience in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel, and Mary found herself drawn to the imagery and language of that story. I think we have great resources in the stories of our tradition which can give us strength as we make meaning of Christmas and the living of Christmas. I want to offer one such story as I considered this aspect of Magnificat themes.

“On the morning of December 9, 1531, a Christian Indian named Juan Diego was on his way to Mass” near modern day Mexico City, and he heard his name called. “Looking up he was surprised to see a young Indian maiden. She instructed him to go to the bishop and tell him to construct a church on a hill, the site of an ancient Nahuatl shrine to the mother goddess. Juan faithfully carried out the assignment, but the bishop paid him no attention. In a subsequent showing the maiden charged him to try again, this time identifying her as the Mother of God. Again the bishop scoffed. At a third audience with the Lady, she instructed Juan Diego to gather a bouquet of roses which were growing, unseasonably, at her feet. Juan gathered the roses in his tilma, or cape. Having gained another audience with the bishop, who had demanded some kind of sign, Juan Diego opened his tilma to present the flowers. To his astonishment, he discovered a full-colour image of the Lady mysteriously imprinted on the rough fabric...

The apparition to Juan Diego occurred only ten years after the conquest of Mexico, a time when the native Indians were languishing under the impact of their cultural decimation. The conquerors had brought with them the new Christian religion, but under such circumstances... it posed little attraction.” But the Lady of Guadalupe was different.

The image of the Lady had dark skin and Indian features. The style and colors of her clothing, her blue mantle covered with stars, her depiction as standing on a crescent moon held aloft by an angel, all these features had deep symbolic references to the Indian religion and culture. She spoke to Juan Diego in his own Nahuatl language—not in Spanish—and presented herself not in terms of power and domination but in terms of compassion and solidarity with the poor... Within six years of the apparition nine million Aztecs were baptized.<sup>5</sup>

The care of God shown to the poor, feeble and hungry in the songs of Mary, Hannah, and Juan Diego has not been lost through the centuries. This Divine

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses For Our Time* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 536-537.

concern extends to the powerful and well fed, like the Bishop of this story or Zacchaeus the tax collector of the Gospels. This is a wonderful Christmas invitation! All are invited to the celebration and table of Jesus, and the implications of the invitation have freighted many of the mighty.

Here I offer other one of those lesser-known facts of the Magnificat. In the last century, three times it was banned by “the powerful” who more treasured profits to people. In colonial India it was banned being sung or read under British rule. In the 1980’s it was banned in Guatemala during a peasant movement advocating agrarian reform. In Argentina mothers whose children all disappeared during the Dirty War (1976-1983) placed the Magnificat’s words on posters throughout the capital plaza; and the military junta of Argentina responded by outlawing any public display of Mary’s song.”<sup>6</sup> Mary’s song has continued to give voice to a world in which the lowly are loved, cared for, and commissioned. Luke’s gospel also affirms that God’s love and way of being can be embraced by the proud and powerful of society; Levi the tax collector and a Roman Centurion are examples of this possibility within Luke’s text.

In this respect I would like to consider another textual aspect of the Magnificat which is a part of Luke’s larger theological interests. In the text of Luke, Mary’s words of exultation are followed by Zechariah’s words of blessing. Both Zechariah and Mary received visits by the angel Gabriel. At first Zechariah had difficulty trusting Gabriel’s message while Mary more readily accepted the implications of Gabriel’s words. Zechariah was a priest serving in the temple; a fairly lofty position. Mary, was a peasant girl without status or influence. Perhaps Luke was alluding to the Jew / Gentile tensions of 1<sup>st</sup> century Christianity; perhaps Luke was alluding to the powerful / lowly tensions of 1<sup>st</sup> century Christianity. The upshot is that we have several strong textual links between Mary and Zechariah. And in the end, both offer words of hope and blessing for all God’s people in the coming of Jesus. The parallel of men / women as well as mighty / lowly continue throughout Luke’s gospel.

- As mentioned, in chapter one Zechariah and Mary are linked
- In chapter two Anna and Simeon are paired
- In chapter four we have healings side by side: Simon’s mother-in-law and a man with an unclean spirit
- Jesus heals a Centurion’s servant in tandem with a widow’s son (ch 7)
- A Pharisee finds himself at the same table as a woman of the city (ch 7)

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<sup>6</sup>Porterfield: <http://enemylove.com/subversive-magnificat-mary-expected-messiah-to-be-like>.

These patterns continue appearing throughout Luke and Acts. Hmmmm, what do we make of this? Clearly questions of Jew / Gentile, gender, and power differentials were import in Luke's gospel for which the Magnificat sets the stage. I quote now from Elizabeth Johnson:

“The Magnificat is a revolutionary song of salvation whose political, economic, and social dimensions cannot be blunted. People in need in every society hear a blessing in this canticle. The battered woman, the single parent without resources, those without food on the table or without even a table, the homeless family, the young abandoned to their own devices, the old who are discarded: all are encompassed in the hope Mary proclaims”.<sup>7</sup>

I have two final two textual observations of the Magnificat, and I will make these short. First, Mary's personal story is set alongside a world story.<sup>8</sup> From verses 46-49 Mary speak very personally of God's attention to her (1<sup>st</sup> person singular). Verses 50-55 are all about larger social themes and God's people as a whole. This is a helpful guide to our prayer life and the way we give witness to the hope that is within us. We begin with ourselves and move out in concentric circles.

Secondly, Mary refers to God as “my saviour” in verse 47. The concept of a saviour in the Greco-Roman world was not theological in its usage, but rather a practical function. Army commanders, financial benefactors, philosophers, doctors, and others were called a saviour.<sup>9</sup> When Mary declares that God is her saviour, we are forced to ask who is ours? The implication of Mary's statement is asking us to whom or what do we look for practical assistance in the circumstances of life.<sup>10</sup> Each of us can answer that on our own, but it is a very pertinent question as we approach the celebration of Christ's birth this week.

Thank you for joining me in this abbreviated journey though the Magnificat. It is my hope and prayer this meditation has enriched your connection to a most influential biblical text which has nourished centuries of Christians. May it nourish us as well. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, quoted at <http://enemylove.com/subversive-magnificat-mary-expected-messiah-to-be-like>.

<sup>8</sup> Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* in the Abingdon New Testament Commentary Series (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 55.

<sup>9</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (volume VII); edited by Kittel & Friedrich, trans by Bromily (Grand Rapids, MI: WM B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1971), pp 1006-1010.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Culpepper, p. 56.