Songs of Peace

I Samuel 2:1-10 Kimby Young

Luke 1:39-55 December 10, 2023

The scripture from Luke for today is often called “The Magnificat” which is the Latin translation of the first words of Mary in this song. “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Or glorifies God. This song is Mary’s response to her cousin Elizabeth when they meet while both women are pregnant and awaiting the births of remarkable sons – John the Baptist, and of course, Jesus. This song is not only beautiful, memorable, and faith filled, it also tells us a great deal about Mary – the young woman who would raise Jesus the Messiah.

First, this song of Mary tells us that Mary was a faithful and even scholarly young Jewish woman. Mary had obviously studied the Hebrew scripture and knew it well. That was unusual for a woman in that day to be allowed to study scripture. So right away we see that Mary is exceptional. It is believed that Mary patterned her song after Hannah’s song - the scripture from I Samuel which we heard from the Old Testament today. Hannah was the mother of Samuel, the first great prophet of Israel. Hannah had been considered barren and therefore cursed, until she prayed to God for a son. Hannah gave birth to her son in her old age, and dedicated him in the temple as a child. Hannah had been ridiculed and shamed until God answered her prayer and reversed her fortune. So Mary chooses as her model, the song of an outcast who was chosen by God and further an outcast who gave birth to one of the most remarkable and influential men in Hebrew history. Perhaps that reflects a bit of what Mary was feeling and hoping as a pregnant peasant teenager. Or Perhaps her cousin Elizabeth was her inspiration at that moment. For Elizabeth had also been considered barren and cursed until the arrival of John. Perhaps Mary was making her own prediction that John would be a great prophet in the line of Samuel. And of course she was right. Maybe it was Elizabeth’s own words spoken just a moment before that inspired Mary’s song – “Blessed is she who has believed that God will do what God has promised.” Perhaps it was these words of affirmation and encouragement in the face of challenge, that told Mary that Elizabeth would be a remarkable mother who would raise a son who would do great things in the world. I see wisdom in these two women – one old, one so very young. They spend three months together in those pregnant days, and I wonder how they might have encouraged one another to become great mothers. And how they might have kept up with one another in the years to come. None of that is recorded in scripture. But we can imagine.

The first few words of Mary’s song are a pretty standard Hebrew song of praise – it begins with humility and puts all honor on God, thanking God both for what is happening in her life right then, and also remembering God’s blessing for God’s people from generations past and for generations to come. This too shows great wisdom on Mary’s part. As she is about to give birth, she thinks about both the past and the future – looking back to honor her heritage, looking forward with hope for her child’s future. Mary didn’t know what was going to happen. But Mary trusted God and moved forward in faith.

The twist in the song comes with verse 51 – “God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts” or as another translation says .… “God has scattered those who are proud of themselves.” Mary begins here a litany of reversals. “God has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.” This is absolutely radical reversal theology. Mary says, and it proves to be true. God will turn the world’s expectations upside down. God will be on the side of the underdog and outcast. God will lift up the poor and needy. God will care for the lost and lowly. God will stand with those who cannot stand alone.

This is not what the world of that day thought. What am I saying… this is not what people today think. We see successful people and we think they are blessed. We see the poor … and what do we think. Mary says, that God says, we should think – God loves them; God is with them; God will lift them up. Further, if we are on God’s side than we should think - how can we help, how can we care, how can we level the playing field, how can we lift up the fallen, how can we make life better for those who can’t do it themselves. Mary says, God is on their side and God will make it right. God will lift up the lowly and give them everything they need. And by implication we should do the same. This is how Mary raised her son Jesus. And this is how Jesus taught his disciples to follow. This is how Jesus transformed the world. Turn everything upside down. That makes everything right.

This is radical thinking from a first century peasant girl. This is a powerful song of justice and hope, and a remarkable witness to faith in God. Because, really, Mary had a right to be terrified and traumatized. Her future could be disastrous. Her life had not gone according to plan – ever since that angel visited and said “Do not be afraid.” How could she not be afraid? I might have run away screaming, or crying. But Mary said, “Let it be for me as you have said.” And then she moved forward in faith from this point on to Bethlehem, and to a life completely in God’s hands. Again, I don’t know that I could have done it. But Mary did it singing.

This song sets the tone for the whole rest of the gospel of Luke. Because in story after story, Mary’s baby boy - Jesus Christ, son of God, - does exactly what Mary says in this song. God thru Jesus lifts up the lowly and feeds the hungry. Jesus recognizes weakness and molds that into strength. Jesus touches those who are hurting and brings wholeness again. From the hard working shepherds to the working class disciples, to the blind and lame and broken, Jesus touches and God transforms lives. God turns their world upside down. God blesses those that seem least likely to be blessed, even blessing you and me. And God does it in the most unlikely way. From birth in a barn, to walking on water, to baskets of bread, to death on a cross, and being raised from the dead to new life. God never does the expected thing. God always does the miraculous thing. And God blesses anyone, everyone, who turns to God in acceptance. God loves everyone without limitations. And God calls us to do the same.

Ah there’s the challenge – 2000 years later – as I’m about to settle into my long winter’s night and celebrate my happy Christmas. As I thank God for my warm home and too much good food. As I thank God for you, my wonderful church community and for all my many blessings. I hear Mary sing this song of justice down through the ages, this song for the poor and lowly, this song of peace that doesn’t come in the expected way. Peace comes not by quiet conformity but by turning the world upside down with love. I hear Mary sing that God scatters the proud, brings down the powerful, empties the rich… and I wonder, is she talking about me. Is Mary talking about us? Do we have some emptying to do? Some letting go? Some giving away? Probably so. We do have power – not as much power as some, but more power than most. And we are called to give that power away in order to help others. We are called to level the playing field and make life better for others. We are called to be on God’s side as God is on the side of the poor. In many ways you already are doing that. Praise God. You are a generous people, and you should feel good about that. But don’t stop there. Continue listening to Mary’s song of justice, God’s song of mercy for the needy, God’s call of peace thru transformation. Open your imaginations to all that you can do, all that we can do together. The possibilities are absolutely limitless. If God can take an old barren woman like Elizabeth and a pregnant peasant girl like Mary, if God can receive their gifts and transform lives through them, just imagine all that God can do if we let God loose here at First Presbyterian Church in Gardner. My goodness, step back and watch the sparks fly – watch the lives touched and transformed. Watch the grace and love poured out. See what extraordinary things God has done and see what remarkable things God is yet to do through you, through us. As Mary says, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.” Amen.

I 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 your 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 honor.

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 will perish in darkness,

 for not by might does one prevail.

The Lord! His adversaries will 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 1:39-55

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.”