

Sermon for December 22, 2024

Seminarian Sam McRae

Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church

Los Alamos, New Mexico

**Luke 1:39-45**

*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." - Luke 1: 39-55*

I would like for everyone to take a moment to recall the most monumental moment in your life. Something good that happened to you that was so powerful and life altering that you knew from that moment on nothing in your life, or maybe even the lives of others, would ever be the same again. What did you do in response to that moment? Were you overwhelmed? Did you cry? Dance? Sing? Did you sit there, because you were paralyzed by gratitude or disbelief? Hang

on to that image for the next few moments. Let that feeling sit inside you while we talk about Mary today.

But first, let me tell you about *Scrubs*. In an episode entitled “My Musical” of the hit television show *Scrubs*, a patient is brought into the ER who has started hearing everyone’s speech in song. The whole of Sacred Heart hospital is turned into a stage- nurses singing patient care, surgical dance numbers. Could you imagine that? Every time someone opened their mouth, from something as banal as taking a food order to telling you your life is threatened by an aneurism, it is delivered in song?

I was never big on musicals growing up, but the older I’ve gotten, the more I have begun to appreciate theatre, particularly the delightful offerings of community theatre. (I especially love those of our own Los Alamos Little Theatre) I recently attended a showing of *Baskerville* in Austin, presented above a Methodist Church near UT campus, and as I was walking home I thought, “Wow. Theatre truly is magical.”

Whenever I come across passages in the Bible where people sing a song of praise, a musical is sort of what I imagine. The focal person turns away slowly, drops to their knees, begins singing, while everyone around them either carries on with normal behavior, or suddenly joins in with synchronized spontaneous choreography. Maybe because I am so far removed from this way of expression, it never occurs to me that this might be a real way of responding to life’s occurrences. I am demonstrative, certainly, but dramatically expressive is not something I do. I tend to cry when I feel any sort of emotion that cannot be expressed in a high-five or a hug or by saying “that is super dope dude.” So, I find Mary’s Magnificat to be less relatable than some. Even if I can appreciate what is happening.

Let’s back up for a second to the time when Mary first learned to what position she had been appointed. Mary was chosen for this role—the role of mother and caretaker to the one who is the Christ. An honor, yes, but also terrifying. Listen to what the angel says 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.” Son of the Most High...the throne of his ancestor David...no end to his kingdom. Even with the security of God’s assurance and Spirit, that is quite the weight to bear.

And she had a choice, make no mistake about it. She questions the angel Gabriel- “how can this be possible?”- and then when she visits Elizabeth, Elizabeth says, “Blessed is she who believed...”. We don’t get a lot of details about the time in between when the angel Gabriel came and when Mary went to visit Elizabeth. But we know that Mary said yes, because in [verse 38](#), she says to the angel Gabriel, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” She consented to the place God had given her.

I feel this is super important to the passage we read today, because I found myself wondering, why did Mary not choose to sing a of praise then, when the angel of the Lord came and told her she had been chosen to grow and bear the Savior of the world? Why not when she said yes? Why did she wait until she visited Elizabeth? I think maybe it took some time to settle in. Maybe Mary is super chill when she gets the news, and is just like, "Okay, cool. That sounds rad." But maybe there was a little bit of shock there too. I mean, this was a big deal– the Messiah was to come through the lineage of David, and was to be king, not only of Israel, but the king of all kings. Mary, being the good young Jewish girl that she was, must have known what this meant...right?

But maybe, just as we say in the Episcopal church, we don't discern in a vacuum. Maybe there was a little bit of corporate understanding that needed to take place, so when Elizabeth says, "Why has this happened to me? That the mother of my Lord comes to visit me?" or when she says, "Oh, this baby just jumped about in my womb when I heard your greeting," maybe that is when it really clicked with Mary. Maybe that is when Mary said..."This is real- God put the Messiah child inside of me to care for. He chose *me*." We know from the Gospel of Matthew that the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream to let him know God's plan for Mary, but according to Luke, this is the first time someone else acknowledges what Mary has been chosen to do. This speaks to the presence of the Holy Spirit within Elizabeth, and, not for nothing, but how cool is it that these two women were entrusted by God to take on these responsibilities. To grow, nurse, and raise the Messiah and the one who came before him to prepare the way? God made women to be powerful beings.

This isn't lost on Mary, because this is when she chooses to let the words of her song of praise flow out of her. Whereas I might have had this realization and did something super cool like vomit from the overpowering anxiety, this is the moment Mary could hold it in no longer, and this song burst out of her. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." Listen to that first line. Already, there is a lot of exalting imagery in those words. She continues to speak of how wonderful God is, "the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name." Holy, sacred, set apart- even the *name* of God, Yhwh, is not to be taken for granted. She describes who God is, God's character- "His mercy is for those who fear him...He has shown strength with his arm...He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly..." Then she remembers God's promises and how he has fulfilled them, "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

While at seminary, I have had the pleasure of rejoicing in this canticle at least 3-4 times a week, usually as a response to one of our readings as it was today. Using a conservative estimate, I would posit that I have prayed the Magnificat aloud about 40 times in the last 5 months. That is a lot of times. One might even argue that I potentially could have memorized this song by now. But, as can be the case, I have often recited it without paying attention to the words I was

saying. Using my eyes to graze over the words and repeat them with my lips while my mind was set firmly on something else- generally what I had missed in class readings.

It wasn't until the first week of Advent that I think it really struck me what Mary was saying. Throughout the Bible, people are always singing when they are met with an occurrence that is praiseworthy. It isn't just that they are excited or happy, but it is usually at a time that is for something monumental. Life-altering. Or in Mary's case, world-altering. So, when it came time to pray over this passage, and asking God, "God- what is it you want me to take from this passage? What do you want me to say?" I started wondering when was the last time I gave God such praise as to burst into song and truly appreciate who God is. Now, I am not one to jump up and down or squeal with delight, God knows that about me. I don't think that is my fault, I am simply not built that way. But I am familiar with sitting in a moment and appreciating my circumstances, in spite of the difficulty they have created. At least a handful of times over the last several months, I have stopped in the middle of doing something and said, "God, I can't believe I get to be here. I can't believe I get to do this. Thank you for calling me." I couldn't do it if God had not called me. I couldn't leave my family, leave my community, move to *TEXAS*. It is so hot there. But there isn't a part of me that feels I can't make it, or that I shouldn't go on. I'm not trying to compare my time at seminary to Mary carrying the Messiah, but I do think that Mary knew the weight of what she was doing. That's why she said yes. That's why I said yes.

We have such privilege here, and that isn't something to be ashamed of. But that is something we have to take responsibility for. Thinking back to the monumental moment you thought of a few minutes ago- how did you respond in that moment? What did you do? Who did you share it with? To whom did you give thanks? The gift we have been given might not be world altering like Mary's was, but it might be. It might be just the thing to change not only your life, but someone else's also. Mary said yes not for herself, but for the whole world. Her song of praise was just the beginning, and then her real work began. So, my friends, the next time God gives you a moment that you know will change the course of your life, ask how you can change the world. Sing your song of praise, and then get to work. Just like Mary did. Amen.