

## **Mary's Song: A Vision of God's Reign** Luke 1:39-56

This Advent Season we are looking at the life of Mary, Jesus' mother. Since she was so central to the first Christmas, perhaps her life can give us a vision for how we should approach Advent.

Last week we considered Mary as a woman of faith. Brian taught from Luke 1 how the angel informed Mary that she had been given a very difficult assignment: she, a virgin, would bear a Child who would reign on the throne of David forever. This was a difficult assignment because "Who would believe that she hadn't been with a man?" Mary didn't know whether her fiancé Joseph would reject her; she didn't know whether she suffer the consequences laid out in the Law concerning someone suspected of adultery. But in an expression of great faith, Mary told the angel, "I am Your bondservant. Be it done to me according to your word." This Advent season, we learn from Mary to accept by faith the difficult assignments that God gives us. God has every right to give us difficult assignments, and in some way they are strategic to His purposes in this world.

This week we are going to consider Mary's Song, also called the Magnificat. In this song Mary expresses great confidence that God will establish a Kingdom through her son that is marked by justice. Specifically, this kingdom will involve a reversal of fortunes: the proud will be humbled and the humble will be exalted. This Advent season, as we think about the birth of Jesus, Mary's Song gives us a valuable perspective that we might otherwise miss. As we'll see, Mary's Song prompts us to live in light of God's kingdom.

### ***Confirmation of Mary's Assignment (Luke 1:39-45)***

This paragraph gives the context of the *Magnificat*. Listen to what happened when Mary went to the home of her cousin Elizabeth.

39 Now at this time Mary arose and went with haste to the hill country, to a city of Judah,  
40 and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. 41 And it came about that  
when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was  
filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 And she cried out with a loud voice, and said, "Blessed  
among women are you, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 "And how has it  
happened to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 "For behold, when  
the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. 45  
"And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been  
spoken to her by the Lord."

All of this had to be a powerful confirmation for Mary about her assignment from God. Remember that her conversation with Gabriel had been a private one. God graciously confirmed to Mary her assignment through Elizabeth's reaction when she visited her.

### ***A Vision for the Reign of God through Jesus (Luke 1:46-56)***

As we read Mary's song, remember that she was a teenage girl (as Brian mentioned last week, historians tell us that Jewish girls were usually betrothed when they were 13 to 16 years old). There are around a dozen allusions to Old Testament passages in the *Magnificat*. This suggests that Mary had heard and internalized a wide range of Scriptures from a young age. This song

makes clear that Mary had thought deeply about the character of God and the promises of God to rescue His people. [Mary's song hits the same themes as Hannah's song in 1 Sam. 2:1-10.]

Mary first expresses that she was full of praise at what God was doing through the Child growing within her:

46 And Mary said: "My soul exalts the Lord,  
47 And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

I'm so very impressed that a teenage girl (or boy for that matter) can speak so freely about her own soul and spirit. She said that her "soul exalts [or magnifies] the Lord." This song is called the *Magnificat* because the Latin translation of Mary's first line begins with the word *magnificat* – "magnify." In the deepest part of her being, she "magnified" the Lord – not in the sense of making Him greater but in the sense of acknowledging God greatness. She said her "spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior." Mary took great satisfaction in the salvation God would bring through the Child.

48 "For He has had regard for the humble state of His bonds slave;  
For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.  
49 "For the Mighty One has done great things for me;  
And holy is His name.

Mary spoke of herself when she mentions that God "had regard for the humble state of His bonds slave." Mary was among the righteous poor in Israel. In the Roman world she was at the bottom of society – a poor, young, Jewish girl. And so the fact that God noticed her and gave her the assignment He did was staggering. In most kingdoms, those at the bottom of society are ignored. Later in her song she will pick up this theme of God noticing the humble.

She only echoes what Gabriel and Elizabeth had both said when she comments that "from this time on all generations will count me blessed." Here today we stand in a long line of generations who have looked back at Mary and counted her blessed both because of her character and because she was given the unique assignment of being the mother of Jesus.

Notice that beginning in verse 49 Mary speaks in past tense (aorist in Greek) even though nothing has changed in the external world. But she speaks as if it had already happened as a way of emphasizing her confidence that the Messiah would be successful in His mission in this world. As we saw last week, Mary was full of faith. She believed that the Mighty One had already done great things for her.

In verse 50 Mary broadens out her praise to include what God would do for the world.

50 "And His mercy is upon generation after generation  
Toward those who fear Him.  
51 "He has done mighty deeds with His arm;  
He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart.  
52 "He has brought down rulers from their thrones,  
And has exalted those who were humble.

Verse 52 needs to be “heard” in its first-century context. Anybody hearing Mary speaking of rulers being brought down from their thrones would have thought of Herod the Great. Herod was a brutal tyrant who had members of his own family executed and who taxed the Jewish people excessively (far worse than King George III). Mary’s words would have been very subversive in first-century Palestine.

In the 1980s the government of Guatemala actually banned the public recitation of the Magnificat for this very reason: it was deemed politically subversive (Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*). And Herod was certainly paranoid about his own grip on power. Do you remember what Herod did when the Magi later arrived from the East looking for the newborn “king of the Jews”? He had all the infants in and around Bethlehem slaughtered. Even the hint of a rival to his authority was met with brutality.

But here we have Mary, a young Jewish girl at the bottom of society, declaring that God has brought down proud rulers from their thrones. This isn’t merely optimism or wishful thinking. This is confidence that by the power of God the Child within her would fulfill His mission and establish His Kingdom. In the Kingdom of God, there can be only one King. Her son would be the king who would reign on the throne of David forever.

The flip side of the proud being scattered and rulers being brought down is found in the last line of verse 52: “He has exalted those who were humble.” Mary had already included herself in that category. Mary was among the humble who would be exalted. She continues this theme of reversal in verse 53:

53 "He has filled the hungry with good things;  
And sent away the rich empty-handed.

When the Kingdom of God is established, everything will be turned upside down. Those who have been proud in heart and who have had everything will suddenly find themselves empty-handed. Not everybody who is rich falls into this category; but Jesus made the comment that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is a work of God when a person has money and doesn’t worship it (treat it like a god). By contrast, the hungry – those who are so poor they don’t have enough to eat – will be filled with good things.

This is Mary’s vision for the Kingdom of God through her son Jesus. We shouldn’t be surprised that 30 years later when Jesus inaugurated (set into motion) the Kingdom of God that He talked about these *same* things. He talked about how everything would be reversed when the Kingdom is fully established.

- “The first will be last and the last will be first” (Matthew 19:30)
- “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,” and “Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied” (Luke 6:20-21).
- And when John the Baptist sent his disciples to discern whether Jesus really was the promised Messiah, Jesus told them (Luke 7):

22 And He answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them.

“The poor have the gospel preached to them.” Those who have nothing finally got some good news. They heard Jesus telling them that the Kingdom of God – with all its riches and all its privileges – was theirs through faith. It was a gift; all they had to do was receive it. It is obviously true that the gospel is also for powerful, rich, influential people; I love it when professional athletes heads of corporations walk humbly with God. But both Mary’s Song and Jesus’ ministry make clear that a hallmark of the Kingdom is that the poor finally get some good news. Those who receive that good news will find that their fortunes are reversed beyond their wildest dreams.

In *Amazing Grace* Philip Yancey tells a story that took place in Boston in 1990. A couple reserved space at the downtown Hyatt for their wedding reception. The bill totaled \$13,000 – which they had to pay up front. Shortly before the wedding, the groom got “cold feet” and broke off the relationship. The bride went to the event manager at the Hyatt to see about getting a refund, but – you guessed it – it was too late. The ex-bride-to-be “faced two choices: eat the loss with no party, or throw a party despite the awful turn of events.”

She decided to do something that nobody anticipated. It turns out that this woman had previously lived on the streets of Boston as well as in a homeless shelter before getting her life back in order. Her experience gave her the idea of blessing a population in Boston that most people overlook:

And so it was that in June of 1990 the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston hosted a party such as it had never seen before. The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken – ‘in honor of the groom,’ she said – and sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters. That warm summer night, people who were used to peeling half-gnawed pizza off the cardboard dined instead on chicken cordon bleu. Hyatt waiters in tuxedos served hors d’oeuvres to senior citizens propped up by crutches and aluminum walkers. Bag ladies, vagrants, and addicts took one night off from the hard life on the sidewalks outside and instead sipped champagne, ate chocolate wedding cake, and danced to big-band melodies late into the night.

That party reminds us of the parable Jesus told about a man who threw a party but nobody came. So his servants went out into the streets inviting everybody who’d come. That’s a picture of the Kingdom. Mary saw it and believed it. And we should too.

The Magnificat ends with an expression of how God has been faithful throughout the history of Israel – from Abraham to the present.

54 "He has given help to Israel His servant,  
In remembrance of His mercy,  
55 As He spoke to our fathers,  
To Abraham and his descendants forever."  
56 And Mary stayed with her about three months, and then returned to her home.

And so this young woman had a vision for what God would do through Jesus her son. God would establish a Kingdom in which all wrongs would be righted. The proud will be toppled and the humble will be exalted. The hungry will be filled and the poor finally receive some good news.

What does Mary's Song mean for us? Especially this Advent season as we celebrate the birth of Christ, what are the implications of the Magnificat for our lives? Let me suggest **two implications**:

***We should look at current circumstances in light of the reign of God through Jesus.***

As in Mary's day (and every generation since), there are plenty of things going on in our world that have the potential of filling us full of fear and dread. There are tyrants who oppress their people every bit as much as Herod the Great in Mary's day; Christians experience horrific persecution all over the world. There is institutional and generational poverty in virtually every country on earth that takes your breath away. There is so much tragedy all around us that it's hard to watch or listen to the news at night. If you didn't know any better, you would think that God is losing almost every battle.

But if we think like Mary thought we will have confidence that God will reign. Jesus didn't merely come to save individual people. He came to establish the Kingdom of God. The perspective of the NT is that the death and resurrection *guarantee* the victory of Jesus. It is not in doubt. 1 Corinthians 15 says that at the return of Christ, God will abolish every rival power and every enemy will be put under His feet.

Many, many Christians live as if the Kingdom of God is in doubt. Many Christians are full of fear about the economy, about terrorism, about globalization, about Christianity being banned from the public square, etc. Those are obviously important, vital issues; I'm not saying we shouldn't be concerned or that we shouldn't do anything. But Mary's Song suggests we see these issues in light of the eventual reign of God.

Doing so will fill us full of faith – just like Mary. We will have the confidence to live as apprentices of Jesus: we can love our enemies (they're really not a threat); we can “be still and know that He is God”; we can pray “Your kingdom come, Your will be done.” Mary's vision of the reign of God changes everything – in our personal lives and in the world.

***We should side with those at the bottom of society every chance we get.*** Mary's vision of the Kingdom should prompt us to have the same mind toward those on the bottom of society that God has. If God is indeed going to reverse the fortunes of the proud and the humble, then it only makes sense that we should certainly side with the humble every chance we get. When we do this, we are putting God's future on display in the present (see Joshua Graves, *The Feast*, p. 108). That's really what Christian ethics are all about – putting God's future on display in the present. When the Kingdom comes, we want to be on the right “side.”

Siding with those on the bottom of society might look different for different people: working for social justice, participating in ministries and organizations that reach out to “the least of these,” giving to the poor, simply befriending someone you meet who has a lot less than you (financially, socially, etc.), throwing a party for people who have no way of paying you back. This is really the heart behind the “Season of Service” projects we've done this fall – getting

outside the walls of the church to people in our community. Tonight if you come back to hear Stephen Miller's concert, you'll also hear about Compassion International – an organization that reaches out to children around the world who are in desperate conditions.

Quite honestly, for many of us the dominant emotion associated with this issue is guilt; we feel guilty for how much we have and how little we share and how little interaction we have with people “on the bottom of society.” Guilt is a very poor motivator – especially long-term. When I do something out of guilt I tend to ask the question, “What's the least amount I have to do here?” And then I tend to be very reluctant and stingy – even when I get involved.

Compassion and joy are much better motivators. When I'm full of compassion for somebody in need, I tend to ask the question, “What's the most I can do here?” And when I get involved I don't resent it; I love. Even if it's hard and strenuous, it's a joyful thing. And so what about the possibility of asking God to give us compassion and joy when it comes to siding with the poor who need some good news, with the hungry, with the humble? Wouldn't it be an amazing thing if this Advent, God gave us hearts of compassion so that we joyfully entered into this issue as a lifestyle? Mary's vision of the Kingdom suggests that we see people the way God does.