

December 11, 2005

The Power of Christmas

Luke 1:39-56

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Today's gospel reading from Luke is a meeting between two expectant mothers.

Elizabeth is getting on in years and has never been able to have a child.

Mary is young and not yet married.

Both pregnancies are unexpected and unplanned by the people involved.

Both children who are growing in their mother's wombs will be special.

Elizabeth's son, John the Baptist, will prepare the way for Mary's son, Jesus.

At the moment of today's passage their sons' ministries lie some 30 years in a future that cannot be seen or known by the mothers, any more than parents today can imagine what their children's lives will be like in 30 years.

Elizabeth, praying against the reality of her past experience, is in seclusion hoping the pregnancy will last full term and bring a son and take away the disgrace she has felt in her culture at not being able to bear a child.

Mary, having what can only be described as a miraculous encounter with the Holy, agrees to partner with God according to God's word, but cannot have any idea what she is going to experience. The angel Gabriel tells Mary her older relative Elizabeth is pregnant with a son and Mary goes with haste to see her. The Gospel lesson two weeks before Christmas involves someone traveling for an exciting and perhaps stressful meeting at her relative's house. Some of us can relate to that. Can you imagine a 17 or 18 year old young woman returning home on Christmas break with the news that she was pregnant with God's child? How do you think you'd respond? Maybe one of Mary's thoughts was, *"If Elizabeth is truly pregnant, it will be a confirmation of my own experience, that I'm not hearing things or crazy."*

When Elizabeth greeted Mary by blessing her and the fruit of her womb *before* Mary could tell her anything, it provided confirmation for Mary about her experience; she wasn't imagining it or hallucinating.

And Mary responded,
"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in **God my Savior**,
for he has looked with favor 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 his name.
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 thoughts 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 helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his **mercy**,

According to the promises he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendents forever.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.”

The first thing to notice about this experience is that Mary praises God for what God has done for her personally. Mary’s **soul magnifies** or declares the greatness of God. Magnify has several meanings, including to glorify or praise, as well as to enlarge or to make greater in size. A magnifying glass enables us to see something more clearly and in greater detail often causing us to be more amazed, impressed or surprised by what we could merely see with our eyes. To look at a lady bug or a leaf or snow under a microscope is to see those things in a deeper way. When Mary says “*my soul magnifies the Lord*,” she is praising God and enabling others to see God’s nature and character more clearly than we can through just the lenses of our own experience.

Seven times Mary describes what God has done saying, “He has...

looked with favor, done great things, shown strength, scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, filled the hungry, helped his servant.”

Mary worships God by recalling the many ways God has acted powerfully on her behalf.

Have you reflected recently on what God has done for you? How has God looked on you with favor? What great things has the Mighty One done for you?

It is so important for us to remember and recall and recount what God has done for us and not to take it for granted or to develop an entitlement mentality that just expects to have all that God has given. Just as we like to hear words of thanks and appreciation from others when we do something kind, generous, or thoughtful, so God enjoys hearing our praise and thanks. It is important to remember that Mary at this point is probably only a teenager, yet she is focusing on God’s blessing in her life and the great things God has done and not the difficulties she will face in being faithful.

Secondly, Mary praises God for what God has done for generations and will do in the future and Mary speaks of all these things as if they were already accomplished.

The God who has been faithful in the past will continue to be faithful in the future. As a rich American, it is a little unnerving to hear Mary stating God is not on the side of the proud and the powerful, and that the rich are going to be sent away empty. Luke's gospel is filled with these kinds of reversals, such as the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. Luke repeatedly warns us not to invest our lives merely trying to climb a pyramid of material success or personal prestige that Mary says God is going to flip upside down. I was surprised to read that one of this year's Christmas fads is upside down Christmas trees. Apparently these are being sold for up to several hundred dollars supposedly because they offer the virtue of showing off more clearly the ornaments that hang from the branches while providing more room for gifts under the tree!

Psalm 34:3 invites us, "*O magnify the Lord with me, let us exalt his name together.*" Considering the favor God has shown us and the great things God has done for us in our lives, our church, our country, our world – how do our souls magnify the Lord in return?

When people's lives get turned around and God gets the credit, the Lord is magnified. When we magnify the Lord we enable others to see God and what God has done more clearly than they can with just their regular vision.

Another way we magnify the Lord is through our obedience to God's word. Elizabeth says to Mary (Luke 1:45), "*Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*"

Mary was obedient to the Lord even though the future didn't turn out the way Mary thought or hoped it would when she shares these joyous words. No parent wants to outlive her or his child; it is arguably the greatest heartache one can experience in life.

When Jesus was just a baby a man named Simeon said to Mary (Luke 2:34-35), "*This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.*"

Surely Mary could not have imagined she would stand one day and see her son publicly executed. However, even her heartache is transformed. The gospel of Luke begins with the joy of Mary and the angels and ends with joy after the resurrection of Jesus. The gospel concludes (Luke 24:52-53), "*And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*"

There is a sense in which the future is never going to be exactly the way we thought or imagined it might be in our lives or our families, however, it is important for us

to be **like Mary** who was faithful and kept trusting God even though her dream didn't turn out the way she thought it would.

Like Mary, God's promises can be fulfilled in us and through us, but the new life God wants to bring forth will take time to develop and may happen in ways that are not always comfortable or even easy for us to accept.

Like Mary, there is a sense in which a church can be pregnant with the possibility of God's future. In a church, pregnancy also requires waiting and coping with changes as they occur. Those changes are not always welcomed or comfortable, but they are endured because there is a purpose in mind - new life is developing in our midst.

Some people say, although it didn't happen with Jill, that women may become irritable at times when they are pregnant. This probably is a malicious falsehood; however, there may be times when the changes get so uncomfortable that a person's attitude and speech take a turn for the worse.

The same is true in growing churches pregnant with the possibility of God's future. We need to be sure we exercise patience and understanding as we get accustomed to new situations God is birthing.

Like Mary, we can glorify God in whole-hearted worship and prayer that ponders what God is doing in our midst.

Only time will reveal what the future will bring. We believe God's promise will be fulfilled in us and through us but it will take time. So what do we do in the mean time? Well, what do expectant parents do? They make preparations.

When we sing Joy to the World on Christmas Eve we hear the words, "*Let every heart prepare him room.*" There is a sense as a church that to prepare to birth God's future we need to prepare room for Jesus to come into our hearts and into our midst.

One of the ways we prepare room is through **a commitment to worshipping God** with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. It is important for us to fully participate in worship and not to merely be a spectator or observer. Notice the exuberance and enthusiasm of Mary's prayer. She is rejoicing in God her savior. Mary is a wonderful model for us in so many ways including her passion for worship and prayer.

Another way we prepare to birth God's future is through **pondering the Power of God and what the Lord is doing**. We read many times in Luke (1:29, 2:19, 2:51) of Mary pondering events in her heart and we know from this prayer of praise in Luke 1 and her presence in the company of believers as they pray in Acts 1 that she was a woman of prayer. Wholehearted worship and passionate prayer are two of the key ways we

prepare to birth the new life God desires to bring forth through us. Expectant parents practice good pre-natal care so that the child may be born as healthy and strong as possible. That's why an expectant mother keeps her system as healthy and clean as possible and eats the right nutritious foods and especially swears off things like ice cream and chocolate for nine months, right? Isn't that what happens?

Mary is pregnant with the possibility of God's future.

God's promise is going to be fulfilled in her and through her, but it will take time.

Pregnancy requires waiting and coping with changes as they occur.

Those changes are not always welcomed or comfortable, but they are endured because there is a purpose in mind. A person is growing, developing, and maturing and new life is going to emerge.

Like Mary, God's promises can be fulfilled in us and through us, but the new life God wants to bring forth will take time to develop and may happen in ways that are not always comfortable or even easy for us to accept.

Like Mary, we can glorify God in whole-hearted worship and prayer that ponders what God is doing in our midst.

Like Mary, we can **magnify the Lord** in our lives so that others may see God more clearly.

Like Mary, we can have **the joy** of looking forward with excitement and anticipation for the new life that God is bringing forth within us and through us.