



## THE MAGNIFICAT: HE HAS REMEMBERED HIS LOVE!

Luke 1:46-55

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Today, the Second Sunday of Advent, we turn our attention from the Beatitudes to Luke's account of the birth of Jesus. At Advent we remember God's promises to come to his people, and anticipate the second advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. How would you have responded had you been there when God fulfilled those promises through the birth of Jesus? According to Luke's account, those who were there responded in song. Rather, they responded in psalm-like poetry, which the church quickly set to music and has been singing ever since, often every day. We know these Lukan canticles by their opening words in Latin: the *Magnificat* of Mary, the *Benedictus* of Zechariah, and the *Nunc Dimittis* of Simeon. These three songs constitute our Advent series this year, followed on Christmas Day by the *Gloria*, sung by the angels announcing to the shepherds the birth of Jesus.

The New Testament gives us two quite different accounts of the birth of Jesus—different because the evangelists had different purposes in writing their gospels. Matthew's infancy narrative is populated with important people. Jesus is introduced as “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1) followed by a lengthy genealogy full of important people—patriarchs and kings. Magi from the east, bearing costly gifts, come to Jerusalem to worship “the one who has been born king of the Jews.” King Herod the Great assembles the important people—the chief priests and teachers of the law. Matthew presents Jesus the Messiah as an important person, the King of the Jews.

These important people don't feature in Luke's account. Instead we have the little people, ordinary people: Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna. These are little people, but they are expectant people. Simeon was looking forward expectantly for the consolation of Israel; Anna spoke about the baby Jesus to those who were looking forward expectantly to the redemption of Jerusalem. Zechariah was praying. It is fitting that we should consider their songs, for these are the same sort of people addressed in the Beatitudes. These are the poor in spirit, who are blessed for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. It is easy for such people to feel overlooked, that they don't matter. Luke emphasizes Jesus's care for the little people, for women, for lepers, for tax collectors and sinners. All are embraced in his hospitality. They learn that it is safe to approach him and ask for mercy.

We are still feeling the shock waves of the unexpected election of Donald Trump as the next president. The polls did not predict this, because they failed to gauge the feeling of many people that they had been forgotten, overlooked, passed by, that Clinton was not paying them attention other than to call them deplorables. In October we drove across Pennsylvania and saw hundreds of Trump–Pence signs but not a single Clinton–Kane sign. These overlooked people wanted a change of narrative. They voted for Trump because they found in him a message of hope. They felt noticed; he had remembered them.

Luke begins his gospel by interweaving parallel accounts of two births, each preceded by an annunciation. First the annunciation by the angel Gabriel to Zechariah of the birth of John the Baptist, followed by the annunciation to Mary of the birth of Jesus. Then the birth of John followed by the birth of Jesus. In between the annunciations and the births he gives us a tender story of the two expectant mothers together for a few months.

The Bible contains multiple accounts of an annunciation to a barren woman, including Sarah, Hannah and Elizabeth. These barren women had prayed for a child, and the Lord heard their prayer. But Mary was not praying for a child; she was betrothed but not yet married. She was the most barren, not having known a man, and the least expectant of all the Bible's barren women. Nevertheless, God sent Gabriel to her, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you” (1:28). Mary was understandably puzzled at the announcement that she would conceive and bear a son: “How will this be?” she asked. “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (1:35). God's presence, in the form of the cloud and his glory, had formerly covered and dwelt upon Mount Sinai as Moses entered the thick darkness to meet with him. The same presence had overshadowed the tabernacle, and later filled the temple; both were dwelling places for one whom Solomon understood even the highest heavens could not contain. Later this presence-cloud would overshadow Jesus and his three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, as from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen” (9:35). Meanwhile, this same presence would now overshadow this young girl Mary. And so her womb would become the dwelling place of God, the container of the uncontainable one! “Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made Man,” as Charles Wesley wrote. Mary's response to this stunning announcement was simple faith: “I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled” (1:37).

Gabriel told Mary that her elderly relative Elizabeth was already in her sixth month of pregnancy. So Mary hurried south from Nazareth into the hill country of Ephraim to visit her, a scene known as the Visitation. When Mary entered the house and greeted Elizabeth, the baby John leaped in Elizabeth's womb, she was filled with the Holy Spirit and she greeted Mary with a blessing, “Blessed are you among women...Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!” (1:42, 45). Marveling that “the mother of my Lord” had come to visit her, she extolled Mary as the model of faith.

Mary's response to Elizabeth's praise is to burst into praise herself in the words of what we now know as the Magnificat. “My soul doth magnify the Lord” (KJV), *Magnificat, anima meum Dominum* in Latin. Today we value originality and penalize plagiarism, but there is nothing original in Mary's song of praise. It is all plagiarized from the Old Testament, primarily from Hannah's song of praise when she dedicated Samuel to the Lord (1 Sam 2:1-10) and from the psal-

ter. But what Mary does with this material is original: she wraps it around herself. She places her own narrative into the larger narrative of Israel and of God.

The poem can be subdivided into four stanzas. In the first stanza (46-48) Mary is thrilled with the Lord:

**My soul glorifies the Lord  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
(Luke 1:46b-48 NIV)**

She bursts into praise with every part of her being, soul and spirit, because God has paid attention to her, has been mindful of her. She is the littlest of the little people, being a yet-unmarried young teenage girl from an insignificant town. Yet the Lord has noticed her; he has looked with care and attentiveness on her humble state. Hannah had used identical language, vowing, "LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give [your servant] a son..." (1 Sam 1:11). Mary hadn't even prayed this prayer, yet the Lord remembered her, he paid attention to her. Mary, like Hannah, was one of the poor in spirit. They didn't count for much in the world's eyes, but they had an appetite for the Lord. So each identifies herself as the Lord's servant. They are hungry for God and available to God for him to do with as he will. So theirs shall be the kingdom of heaven. They are poor in spirit, for God is what they want. Theirs shall be the kingdom of heaven, for God is what they shall get.

Mary looks ahead and sees that all future generations will call her blessed. This, too, is the language of the beatitudes: Blessed are the poor in spirit. She invites future generations, all those who will be gathered in the church around her son, to identify with her happiness, this one whom Elizabeth had acclaimed as "the mother of my Lord." As the one proclaimed blessed, Mary's life is paradigmatic; it is held up for emulation. Her response of humble, faithful obedience and exultant joy is a model for all. Unfortunately, in Eastern and Catholic traditions Mary has been so exalted that she is far beyond any emulation. But much of the Protestant church has overreacted, disregarding Luke's presentation of her as a model disciple. She is a model of faith and humble obedience, making herself available to the Lord: "let it be to me according to your word."

In the first stanza Mary has praised God that he has paid attention to her. In the second stanza (49-51a) she moves on to what he has done for her, his poor and needy maid-servant.

**for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name.  
His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.  
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; (1:49-51a)**

The Mighty One has done great things for her. The Mighty One is the one able to do things, the one for whom nothing is impossible, as Gabriel had earlier told Mary (1:37), and as the Lord had told Abraham concerning Sarah (Gen 18:14). The Lord is the Potent One who has potency to do great things. His power has overshadowed Mary so that she conceive. The one whose arm is strong to perform mighty deeds has done this mighty deed for her.

Mary unites what to us might seem contradictory ideas, God's power and his mercy. God uses his great power to extend mercy,

not just to Mary but to all generations. There are two aspects to this mercy. Firstly, God's mercy is his loyal love. As Israel sang frequently, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever." God's love is his loyal love, his faithfulness to his covenant purposes. God's mercy is also his compassion, the tenderheartedness of a mother towards her child. In his loyal love he shows compassionate mercy, because he remembers. This compassionate loyal love is celebrated twice in Mary's song, twice in Zechariah's song, and also by the Elizabeth's neighbors and relatives. God's mercy, expressed in his loyal love and in his compassion to these little people, is an important theme in chapter 1.

Mary joins together God's power and his mercy. Later, when Jesus told his disciples that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, they asked him, "Who then can be saved?" He replied, "What is impossible with man is possible with God" (Luke 18:27). God extends mercy, so that it is possible to enter his kingdom. So the thief on the cross dared to ask, "Jesus, remember me" (Luke 23:42). And so Jesus did; he remembered, and in remembering he extended mercy. Mary's Magnificat is a celebration of the fact that the Mighty One remembers, and when he remembers he remembers compassionately. In his great power he shows mercy.

When the Lord threatened to destroy his people Israel when they wanted to return to Egypt, Moses made a daring request:

**"Now may the Lord's strength be displayed [or magnified], just as you have declared: 'The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion...' In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now." (Num 14:15-19)**

In God there is no tension between his power and his mercy. In the Greco-Roman world mercy was a weakness; in parts of the world today mercy is still a weakness. But for God mercy is a strength. He magnifies his power by extending mercy, compassion and love. It is precisely because he is strong that we can dare ask him for mercy, knowing that he loves to forgive. What kind of God is this? Is this how you understand God? Or do you see a God who, in his strength, stands ready to punish us? The only appropriate response is to fear him in reverential worship, in awed wonder—and to sing, like Mary.

Verse 51 is the central couplet of Mary's poem. The first line terminates stanza two, the second line introduces the third stanza (51b-53). In the first two stanzas Mary's focus has been on her own narrative; it is mostly in the first person. In the last two stanzas her focus is on God's narrative; he is the subject of all the verbs. The first person is not used at all.

**he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty. (1:51b-53)**

God has performed mighty deeds in the incarnation, in the implantation into the virgin's womb by the Holy Spirit of the one whom heaven cannot hold. God uses his strength *for* his people. But God also uses his strength *against* his enemies and against those who oppress his people. He uses his strength for social justice, to turn the world upside down. Here Mary speaks in concert with the

Old Testament prophets. Micah, for example, pronounced “Woe” on those who lay awake at night plotting evil and rushed out at morning’s light to carry it out, seizing the fields and houses of the little people, “because it is in their power to do it” (Mic 2:1). God sees their arrogant inner schemings, and he is mindful. He uses his power to scatter those who misuse their power to defraud those who have no power.

Mary gives two examples: he humbles the rulers and exalts the humble; he fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty. The rulers, the potentates, have been dislodged and rendered impotent by the Potent One. The humble are the poor in spirit, those longing for God, those whom the Lord has remembered in mercy. But it’s not a case of simply reversing the situations so that the humble take the place of the rulers. God doesn’t exalt the humble to a position of power, lest they in turn oppress those who have been newly cast-down. The kingdom of God is not about such power or authority. God will appoint his humbled and exalted servant to be head of the church. But the path to his exaltation is first exaltation onto the cross before exaltation to God’s right hand. Jesus, the risen Lord, does not use his headship to his own advantage. As head his relationship to the body is not to live off of the body but to nourish the body. The pattern he sets is one of self-sacrifice; this is God’s topsy-turvy world of power. It is ironic that the Eastern and Catholic churches have exalted Mary to a position of power, have made her a potentate, the Queen of Heaven. Mary’s hymn is a rebuke to this way of thinking.

The second example will be echoed in the fourth beatitude, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt 5:6). The hungry are those who hunger for God; they will be satisfied. As the psalmist wrote, “he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things” (Ps 107:9). What are your appetites? What do you hunger and thirst for? Is it for the Lord, as the deer pants for water? Do you find yourself satisfied? Is he enough? The poor in spirit are those for whom God is enough. The rich are those for whom he is not enough, for they lack appetite for him. In their contented, self-satisfied sufficiency they have no need for God. At the end they will be empty, for everything they invested in rusts and decays.

This third stanza carries a punch, both a rebuke and a prospect. Mary invites us to examine ourselves and see where we stand in these two couplets. Are we with the powerful or with the humble? Are we with the thirsty or with the self-satisfied?

In the fourth stanza (54-55) Mary returns to the theme of the first stanza: God has come in salvation to his poor and needy servant.

**He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful  
to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
just as he promised our ancestors. (1:54-55)**

At the beginning that poor and needy servant was Mary herself. Here at the end the poor and needy servant is Israel. God has been mindful of his servant Mary, and he has remembered his servant Israel. Mary recognizes that God’s great deeds on her behalf are really on behalf of Israel. The two come together because the one who is to be born to his servant Mary is himself his Servant, the reduction to one faithful man of his servant Israel.

In remembering his mercy, God has been faithful to Abraham and his seed. Paul will later point out that Abraham’s seed is Christ himself, the one whom Matthew’s gospel introduces as the son of Abraham. God promised Abraham that he would have a seed, that his descendants would be beyond counting, and that in this seed all nations would find their blessing. God showed his faithfulness to this promise by placing his servant as this seed in the womb of the virgin Mary, that container of the uncontainable. When we belong to this seed, to the risen and exalted Christ, we all, Jew and Gentile alike, are children of Abraham and heirs of the promise. In being faithful to his covenant promises to Abraham long ago, God has shown his righteousness. He has been true to his promises. He has been true to his purposes to have a people for his name. And he has been true to his character. In this last stanza we have a Biblical theology in miniature. God’s narrative, Israel’s narrative and Mary’s narrative are all wrapped up in one as the power of the Most High overshadows the womb of the virgin, making it the dwelling place of his servant, who is none other than God himself.

We consider these Lukan canticles only every few years at Advent (as we did in 2004, 2008). But the church universal has considered these songs so important that it sings or recites all three of them every single day, in the morning or evening. These are songs for the whole people of God, songs for us. The Magnificat is particularly important and cherished. It is used in the morning in the eastern church, at Lauds for the Greek Orthodox; and in the evening in the western church, at Catholic Vespers, and Anglican Evening Prayer or Evensong. These three texts have been central to the church’s liturgy, and none has been more central than the Magnificat. It has been set to music more often than any other sacred text.

Reciting or singing such texts helps form us. In the Magnificat we join Mary in giving fulsome praise to God because he has done great things for us, because he has been mindful of our poor and needy state. As he considered Mary’s womb to be a fit dwelling place for his presence, so he considers us as the church to be a fit dwelling place. He who overshadowed the tabernacle and the temple, filling them with his glory, then overshadowed Mary, has now set his presence among us. He uses his power not against us, but to show us great mercy out of his loyal love and his compassion. His servant whom he has appointed as Head uses his power to nourish and cherish us his Body. Our response is to put ourselves at his disposal as his servants, as did his servant Mary.

God has remembered. He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant Mary. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful. He remembers us, and when he remembers us he does so for good, because he is for us.

The little people of Luke’s gospel were waiting expectantly for God to come to his people. At the first Advent of our Lord, in the form of the baby Jesus, they sang joyfully. We, in turn, wait expectantly for our Lord to return in his Second Advent. Meanwhile we live out our lives here on earth in God’s kingdom, empowered by his Spirit among us and in us. We live lives of joyful thanksgiving, praising along with Mary, with our souls magnifying the Lord for the great things he has done for us. He has remembered us in our humble state, has lifted us up, and has satisfied us with good things.