

**The Magnificat:
The Refrain of the Revolution
Luke 1:26-55**

Advent is the season of music. Music has incredible power to awaken dull minds, stir the emotions, and activate our wills with tremendous force. Consider the stirring sounds of a lone trumpet playing taps or the bagpiper's penetrating notes of "Amazing Grace" at a funeral, or the heart-stopping beat of a massive drum roll of a marching band at a football game. Music can also be revolutionary, stirring the hearts of men to take up arms to combat injustice, as passionately played out in the musical, *Les Misérables*.

Do you hear the people sing,
singing the song of angry men?
It is the music of the people
Who will not be slave again!
When the beating of your heart
Echoes the beating of the drums
There is a life about to start
When tomorrow comes!

Unfortunately, most political revolutions do not deliver on the dreams of equality and justice for the oppressed. But Israel's prophets, poets and gospel writers tell a different story, imagining a new world, when God would win a victory over all the forces of evil and "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (Isa 11:9; Hab 2:14).

Just as 1 Samuel opens with the story of God inaugurating new beginnings through a barren woman after 400 years of spiritual compromise with the birth of Samuel to Hannah, so Luke's gospel opens with stories of two miraculous births following 400 years of silence. The first records the birth of John to Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah; and the second, the birth of Jesus to Mary. Luke is not introducing a new story but continuing and advancing the story of God's work of saving the world to its fulfillment in the person of Jesus. These boys will grow up to become the agents of God's long-promised revolution, the victory over the powers of evil.

The fact that God is taking his revolution to unprecedented levels is further highlighted by the fact that these twin births are climaxed with not one but four songs of praise. The first is Mary's song, known as the Magnificat. The second song, *Benedictus*, is sung by John's father, Zechariah. The third song angels sing, "Glory to God in the highest," or in Latin, *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* (Luke 2:14). The fourth is the Song of Simeon, "who was waiting for the consolation of Israel" and praised God saying, "You may now dismiss (*nunc dimittis*) your servant in peace" (Luke 2:29).

This morning we will examine the angel's announcement to Mary (1:26-38), followed by her visit to her relative, Elizabeth (1:39-45), and conclude with Mary's response to Elizabeth's greeting and blessing, the Magnificat (1:46-55).

I. The Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38)

A. Gabriel's Announcement to Mary

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:26-28 ESV)

The first hint that revolution is in the air is the presence of the archangel Gabriel, who stands before God in his court and who, we know from the book of Daniel, is an eschatological messenger sent from God to help the prophet interpret visions regarding the last days (Dan 8:16; 9:21). Now after centuries God has again sent him from heaven to announce two miraculous births. Earlier in Luke he had been sent to the spiritual center Israel, the Holy Place at the temple, to announce John's birth to the officiating priest, Zechariah.

The scene is filled with several echoes from the birth of Samuel, Israel's first prophet. But unlike Hannah, Zechariah is slow to believe in God's promise and rather than rejoicing in thanksgiving and song, he is struck dumb, symbolic of the nation's spiritual insensitivity. Despite his hardness of heart, Elizabeth received the ability to conceive and, by the grace of God, her status was restored among God's people. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent Gabriel back to earth for a second birth announcement "to Mary, far away from the temple mount in Jerusalem, to Nazareth in Galilee – insignificant, despised, unclean."¹

These two women represent two generations in Israel, the old and the new. Elizabeth is old, beyond the childbearing years, and though she is a daughter of Aaron, being barren she has suffered disgrace. She typifies Israel's estrangement from God and disgrace from being oppressed by tyrannical foreigners. Mary represents the new Israel. She is young, most likely twelve to thirteen years of age, and is introduced "as if she were an orphan with no family background provided; she is betrothed to Joseph, but as such has not yet entered into his house or inherited his status. Yet, she is favored by God, through for no apparent reason other than God's gracious choice."²

In this revolution, the main players are the little people, who by the world's standards have either lost their status, or never had any status to rely on. As in Hannah's story, status is redefined and restored by one's faith. In Luke these "little people" become the heroic models of faith and trust. Three times we are told that Mary is a virgin, and when offered the choice to cooperate with God's saving activity, she must by faith count the cost of suffering shame for

becoming pregnant prior to marriage and face the possibility of losing her status in Joseph's household. **Will she do it?**

The angel greets Mary with, "Rejoice, favored one, the Lord is with you!" Joy is to fill her heart because she is the recipient of God's undeserved grace. Such favor raises her status to that of the greatest leaders in Israel. The phrase, "I will be with you," conveys more significance than a generic promise of God's traveling presence. It is most often addressed to Israel's leaders when they are called to a task of insurmountable odds, like the Exodus, "or when setting out on an undertaking that seems very likely to fail."³ This was God's pre-game speech to Moses before he sent him off to Egypt to confront Pharaoh. So now God gives the same speech to twelve-year-old Mary. If she will respond in faith, the omnipotent God will be with her to protect, encourage, and strengthen her until the task for which she has been called is completed. Called by grace with results that guaranteed, now that is a cause for joy. But that is only the half of it.

But she was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name 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 father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (1:29-33)

To a bewildered Mary, Gabriel explains that she will be the mother of Israel's long expected king, God's very own Son ("the Son of the Most High"), who will be given "the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." Gabriel's words echo the language of other birth announcements, especially the one given to Sarah, (Gen 16:11) coupled with Daniel's description of the exaltation of "one like a son of man" (Dan 7:13-14). Taken together one cannot help but be overwhelmed that this is the climatic moment of history, the restoration of Israel and the salvation of the world.

B. Gabriel's Further Explanation

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." (1:34-37)

With the complexity of expectations whirling in her head, Mary asks, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Unlike Zechariah's unbelief that seeks for a sign (1:18), Mary's question seeks an explanation to understand the supernatural *way* that the process will unfold. Gabriel's

answer reveals that though Mary indeed will play a role as an obedient recipient of grace, the miracle will be all God's doing.

Joel Green points out that "the first two clauses of Gabriel's response parallel one another and prepare for the third:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and
the power of the Most High will overshadow you;
consequently, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God."⁴

These two lines bring together God's omnipotent power manifest in his Spirit with his absolute holiness. In the book of Judges, leaders had Spirit without character, which led to a disaster. With the coming of Jesus and the pouring out of his Spirit at Pentecost, leaders demonstrate the power of the Spirit in their lives by means of godly character.

Gabriel concludes with a reminder to Mary of God's omnipotent power. The NIV better translates the verse "No **word** from God will ever fail." Those words ignite her memory of the Lord's statement to Sarah in Gen 18:14 (LXX): "Is anything impossible with God?" With that final word, Mary's faith leaps over the wall.

C. Mary's Surrender

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (1:38)

Like Abraham, Mary "gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that what he had promised he was able also to perform" (Rom 4:20-21). The personal and social cost to Mary in making such a commitment is difficult to comprehend, but as Green comments, her faith is revolutionary and becomes a model for all Israel.

Mary's response to the divine announcement contrasts sharply with that of Zechariah's, with the result that she, surprisingly in scenes of this type, has the last word. She unreservedly embraces the purpose of God, without regard to its cost to her personally...In describing herself as the Lord's servant, she acknowledges her submission to God's purpose, but also her magnificent role in assisting that purpose. Moreover, she claims a place in God's household, so to speak; indeed, in this socio-historical context, her words relativize and actually place in jeopardy her status in Joseph's household. For her, partnership in the purpose of God transcends the claims of family.⁵

The result of all this is that Mary, who in that world was at the bottom of the social scale in terms of age, family, heritage, gender, and so on, turns out to be the one favored and exalted by God. In this revolutionary kingdom one's status is defined by one's obedience to God and the privilege of being used for his saving purposes. This theme is reinforced in Luke's description of Mary's journey to see her Aunt Elizabeth.

II. Mary's Journey to Visit Elizabeth (1:39-45)

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

(1:39-40)

Having been touched by an angel, Mary breaks with all social conventions to journey by herself some seventy miles to the hill country around Jerusalem to be with her aunt. As a young girl, Mary, would have never been allowed to venture outside the home without accompaniment, even in her own town, let alone travel clear across the country. She must have taken God's promise seriously that "the Lord would be with you!" You'll remember how Hannah was a woman to be reckoned with, who stands on her own two feet; Mary is a woman who runs on her own two feet!

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry,

"Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!

And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come

to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears,

the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed

that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the

Lord." (1:41-45)

In spite of her at-risk adventure, Elizabeth responds to her greeting with enthusiastic joy, because of the larger realities that are developing in their respective wombs that transcend social and cultural norms. Three times Luke mentions Mary's greeting and the impact it has upon Elizabeth and the unborn John. Upon hearing Mary's voice, the Spirit completely takes over and overwhelms everyone with joy, including the unborn John. In Mary's voice, John recognizes his Lord to come, and though he cannot speak, he manages to leap. Elizabeth is instantly filled with the Spirit, and gives the divine interpretation of all that occurred, and blesses Mary for her obedience.

How revolutionary is all this? There is something remarkably new here. In previous annunciation scenes, when the announcement of a child was made to a barren woman, there was always the painful presence of jealousy between two rival women— Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, and finally, Hannah and Penninah. But now, with the announcement of the coming of Christ and the Messianic age, we notice no pride by Mary or resentment by Elizabeth; but instead, mutual respect and a deep affection for one another. Each woman rejoices in the grace given to the other, for in God's kingdom there is no need for competition, because we all uniquely complement one another with different gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4-7). And on some occasions the older and more experienced individual steps aside to bless the younger and less

experienced as having a greater role to play and finds their greatest joy in their supporting role. This will exemplify John's relationship with Jesus. Jesus says of John, "among those born of women there is no one greater than John." John was the last prophet in Israel who came to anoint Israel's final King. His word was so powerful that "all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem" (Mark 1:5). But from John's point of view, his sole purpose was to prepare the way of the One who was coming, who was greater than he was. John's motto was, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). This is the authentic mark of God's people in the age of the Spirit.

It is significant as well that Mary's response to Elizabeth's praise is to graciously step aside, diverting it all upward to God in jubilant song. The Magnificat "is one of the most famous songs in Christianity. It's been whispered in monasteries, chanted in cathedrals, recited in small remote churches by evening candlelight, and set to music with trumpets and kettledrums by Johann Sebastian Bach."⁶

III. The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55)

"Much of Mary's song echoes the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, which celebrated the birth of Samuel and all that God was going to do through him. Now these two mothers-to-be celebrate together what God is going to do through their sons, John and Jesus... In many cultures today, it's the women who really know how to celebrate, to sing and dance, with their bodies and voices saying things far deeper than words."⁷ I read it as having two stanzas (vv. 46-50; 51-55), each with two strophes.

A. The First Stanza

And Mary said,

**"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.**

**For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.**

**And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation. (1:46-50)**

In the first stanza, Mary articulates her praise (vv. 46-47) and the reasons for her praise (vv. 48-50); in the second stanza, she details the great reversals (vv. 51-53) and applies her praise to Israel (vv. 54-55). In verses 46-47 (drawn from 1 Sam 2:1-2; Hab 3:18), Mary bursts into wholehearted praise because of her personal encounter with the Lord, who took note of her lowly estate and chose her to be one to birth the Savior into the world. Mary is consumed with joy as she comes to realize that the eschatological coming of God is at hand.

Drawing upon her memory of Hannah's prayer, "if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me" (1 Sam 1:11), Mary is overwhelmed that God is doing for her what he did for Hannah; yet in Mary's case, the gift came without Hannah's pain or her petition or vow. Mary is chosen to be part of God's revolution for seemingly no reason, except that the Lord had regard for her lowly, humble estate. This is what motivated her to turn her life completely over to God's saving purposes.

From Mary's her point of view, being a bonds slave in God's household is the most exalted position in life, for she knows that what God has done for her will be lauded by every generation. The virgin birth will be catalogued in the list of "Great Things" that Israel celebrated in their liturgy (Pss 71:16, 19; 77:11) to remind themselves of the many acts of salvation God had done on their behalf.

The exaltation of the lowly is Mary's understanding of how God supremely manifests his holiness on earth. And she leaves the door wide open, reminding us that this amazing grace is available to any who humble themselves to fear the Lord (Ps 103:17, Jas 1:9; 4:6,10; 4:10; 1 Pet 5:6-7).

B. The Second Stanza

**He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty. (1:51-53)**

In the second stanza, Mary projects from the great things God has done in her womb to the "great things" God has done for Israel and the world. As in Hannah's song, it is the story of **awesome reversals** that turn the pecking order of Israel's social world on its head.

The opening line resonates with striking allusions to Israel's Exodus, when the Lord became Israel's "Mighty Warrior," bared his holy "arm" and "scattered" his enemies to redeem his people with "great" judgments (Exod 6:6; 15:16; Ps 68:1, 14; 89:10). Mary is announcing that the New Exodus which the prophets had promised, and that Israel had longed for, was now here. This is a decisive moment in history when there is going to be a radical shift in the existing powers structures. God is exercising his *omnipotent* power pulling down all other *potentates* and placing the humble in their place.

The proud who grasp for positions of honor will be scattered, brought down, and sent away empty handed. After Herod, whose casual brutality was backed by Rome, had James the brother of John killed, the angel of the Lord struck him down and he was eaten by worms. After the Emperor Augustus (63 B.C. – 14 C.E.) expanded his empire and brought unity and peace to most of the known world, he acquired the titles – "Son of God," "Imperator of Land and Sea,"

the “Benefactor and Savior of the Whole World.” In an effort to increase the tax base for the Roman treasury, Augustus exercised his sovereignty by decreeing a registration of “all the world.” In reality, Augustus was merely acting as God’s puppet, as his decree became the vehicle to get a young couple from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to fulfill Micah’s prophecy that the lowly city of Bethlehem would be “exalted” as the birthplace of the new King.

**“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.” (Micah 5:2 NIV)**

When the angels announce the birth of the Messiah, the announcement is not made to the heads of the state, but to lowly shepherds, who were poor and considered as outsiders and unclean. They were close to the bottom of the social scale in that world. With the birth of Jesus, the powerful are already being brought down, while the lowly are being lifted up as God subverts the existing social order that perpetuates such distinctions.

Once the humble are lifted up, they are “filled with good things.” Which means the life that God gives is more satisfying than physical food. As Jesus testified to the disciples when they offered him food after his interaction with the Samaritan woman by saying, “I have food to eat that you do not know about...My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish His work” (John 4:32, 34). The task of exalting those who are outcasts, poor in spirit and humble is the most fulfilling and rewarding work on earth, and it sustains us beyond what we are humanly capable of.

Mary concludes her song adapting the final words of Micah’s prophecy, which seals the source of her joy in God’s covenantal love.

**He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” (1:54-55)**

Just as Hannah asked God to “remember” her, so Mary realizes on a grand scale that her pregnancy is rooted in God’s covenantal faithfulness to “remember” his promises to the patriarchs. All of God’s promises in the Old Testament are now reaching their fulfillment in the child being formed in Mary’s womb. And the driving force behind it is God’s loyal love. Centuries may come and go, but God never ever forgets.

But it’s important to note that Mary’s praise is going to be severely challenged by severe suffering. As N. T. Wright observes, “A sword will pierce her soul, she is told when Jesus is a baby. She will lose him for three days when he’s twelve. She will think he’s gone mad when

he's thirty. She will despair completely for a further three days in Jerusalem, as the God she now wildly celebrates seems to have deceived her. All of us who sing her song should remember these things too. But the moment of triumph will return with Easter and Pentecost, and this time it won't be taken away."⁸

Praise celebrates the God's glorious future and brings it forward into the present. And though it did not prevent Mary from enduring incredible suffering, despite the pain, the praise still stands sacred and true. May the song ring eternal in our hearts.

Do you hear the people sing
Lost in the valley of the night?
It is the music of a people
Who are climbing to the light.
For the wretched of the earth
There is a flame that never dies.
Even the darkest night will end
And the sun will rise. (Les Misérables)

Benediction:

3rd Sunday before Advent

The Collect

Almighty Father,
whose will is to restore all things
in thy beloved Son, the King of all:
govern the hearts and minds of those in authority
and bring the families of the nations,
divided and torn apart by the ravages of sin,
to be subject to his just and gentle rule;
who lives and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

May you be filled with the wonder of Mary, the obedience of Joseph, the radiant joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, and the peace of the Christ child. May the Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit bless you now and forever. Amen.

¹ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 84.

² Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 62.

³ Donald E. Gowen, *Theology in Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 65.

⁴ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 90.

⁵ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 92

⁶ N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 15.

⁷ Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 14

⁸ Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 14-15.