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Luke 1:26-55

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TELL OUT MY SOUL

Today is the 17th day of the holiday shopping season, a season in which the American consumer and the American retail industry cooperate in a frenzied orgy of consumption. From the very first day of the season, the analysts and pundits prognosticate about whether the American consumer is performing better than he did last year, whether she is consuming more. The season has its own liturgy with special music and art: songs about the imminent arrival of Santa Claus, about his team of reindeer, about the possibility of a white Christmas; art depicting Santa's sleigh piled high with gifts. We are bombarded with this music and art every day and are much relieved when, after just four or five weeks, it is put away until the next year.

Today is also the third Sunday of Advent, a season which the Church, and by this I mean the Church Universal for at least the last 1500 years, has dedicated to a quite different purpose. The Church has set aside Advent as a time of quiet and sober reflection, a time of waiting and preparation for the coming of the Lord, which we celebrate in the Nativity, the birth of Jesus. By the tenth century the Church had standardized on a season of four Sundays, with each Sunday devoted to a different theme. Today, the third Sunday, is Gaudete Sunday, Rejoicing Sunday, when we ponder the fact that this period of waiting will climax in cause for great celebration and joy, with the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. The season has its own liturgy, with its own art and music. Most of the art is drawn straight from the Biblical text, depicting scenes from Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus: the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38), the Visitation (Luke 1:39-45), the Adoration of the Shepherds (Luke 2:16-20), the Adoration of the Magi (Matt 2:1-12), the Presentation in the Temple (Luke 2:21-39), the Flight to Egypt (Matt 2:13-15), and the Massacre of the Innocents (Matt 2:16-18). But unlike today's secular Christmas art, this religious art does not get put away at the end of the season. It remains on view to be meditated on throughout the year.

The Advent season has inspired a whole genre of hymnody, which today we call the Christmas carol. Some of these hymns are very ancient: *Of the Father's Love Begotten* goes back to the fourth century; *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* to the twelfth century but with roots much earlier than that. Some of the greatest hymn-writers have contributed to this genre. These carols are brought out and dusted off for just a few weeks each year, and we all love singing them.

But the stories associated with the birth of Jesus have contributed another set of songs to the Church's liturgy, songs which are drawn directly from the Biblical text, from Luke's

infancy narrative. Unlike the carols, these songs are not put away at the end of the season. These songs, like much of the religious art, have been an integral part of the Church's liturgy and meditation throughout the year and throughout the centuries.

Today I want to direct our thoughts to two stories associated with the birth of Jesus, and to do so with the help of a piece of art and a song. Both stories are found in Luke 1. The first story is the announcement of the angel Gabriel to Mary that she would bear a son to be called Jesus. Known as the Annunciation, this scene has been depicted in countless thousands of works of art. The second story is Mary's song of praise, known as the *Magnificat*. This song has been set to music more than any other text of Scripture. While we tend to consider Luke's infancy narratives only at Christmas, and not every year at that, much of the Church has paid attention to representations of the Annunciation and the *Magnificat* throughout the year every year.

Luke begins his history of the events associated with the life of Jesus with a lengthy account of the birth of two sons to two barren women, the birth of John to Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, and the birth of Jesus to Elizabeth's relative Mary. He presents these accounts in parallel: a birth announcement to Zechariah (1:5-23) followed by a birth announcement to Mary (1:26-38); the birth of John (1:57-80) followed by the birth of Jesus (2:1-40). There are many parallels between these two pairs of accounts. In between the two announcements and the two births, Luke records the interaction between the two women, the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth (1:39-45) and Mary's response to Elizabeth's greeting (1:46-55). Today we will look at the second birth announcement, that to Mary, and at the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth's home. In both accounts we will focus on Mary's response to God's activity.

The Annunciation (1:26-38)

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will

reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her. (1:26-38 NIV)

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, the angel Gabriel returned to earth with another birth announcement. Gabriel is an archangel, one of the seven angels who stand in the presence of God (cf. 1:19) ready to act as his messengers to the world. Two of these archangels are named in Scripture, Gabriel and Michael. Intertestamental Jewish literature had names for the other five. Today it’s Santa’s reindeer that have names! Twice within six months God sent Gabriel with a message for his people, announcing the birth of a son to a barren woman. Elizabeth had been barren throughout her long marriage to Zechariah, and was beyond child-bearing age (1:7); she suffered reproach for being barren. Mary was barren because she was an unmarried virgin; she would suffer reproach were she to become pregnant before marriage.

The annunciation to a barren woman of the birth of a son is a repeated event in Scripture, what Robert Alter calls a “type-scene.”¹ In each case the barrenness is more than just a physical condition; it is a spiritual condition. This doesn’t mean that Elizabeth and Mary were themselves barren. Far from it; Luke holds them up as models of piety. Rather, their barrenness reflects the spiritual barrenness of the people in and through whom God is working his salvation. This salvation requires God’s miraculous intervention for his people are unable to save themselves.

Of the several Old Testament annunciation type-scenes two in particular form the background for these two New Testament annunciations: the annunciation to Abraham and Sarah and the annunciation to Hannah. Like their descendants Zechariah and Elizabeth, Abraham and Sarah were advanced in years and Sarah was barren (Gen 11:30; 18:11). When three angels appeared to Abraham and announced that his barren wife would bear a son, Sarah responded in disbelief, asking, “Will I really have a child now that I am old?” (Gen 18:13). This disbelief brought the rebuke, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (Gen 18:14).

Though Luke presents him as a pious man, Zechariah asked Gabriel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years” (1:18). This, too, brought an angelic rebuke, and Zechariah was struck dumb.

Mary also responded with a question, “How will this be... since I am a virgin?” (1:34). Her question is not treated as unbelief, not “How can I know?” but “How will this happen?”

Gabriel explains that her barrenness will be overcome through the Holy Spirit coming upon her, that this son will be conceived through the power of the Most High overshadowing her. This might seem impossible, but old Elizabeth is already in her sixth month of pregnancy. How can this be? It can be because “nothing is impossible with God.” Mary’s response to this statement is humble acceptance of God’s will, “I am the Lord’s servant... May it be to me as you have said” (2:38). This submission to God’s will is the climax of the annunciation story.

Seven weeks ago Sue and I flew to Italy for a two-week vacation in Tuscany and Rome. We looked forward to good food, good company, and good rest. But we were also on a mission to see several pieces of art in Milan, Florence, Siena and Rome. In Florence our goal was a set of frescoes by Fra Angelico. We were familiar with several of these frescoes but didn’t know their setting. I was expecting them to be in a museum, but when we got to the Museum of San Marco we found that the museum is part of a Dominican monastery, the very monastery where Fra Angelico himself lived. The frescoes are still on the walls exactly where Fra Angelico painted them almost 600 years ago. On the wall of each of 43 cells Fra Angelico painted a fresco depicting a scene from the life of Christ. Each cell would have been sparsely furnished with a bed, a chair, and what the art world would now consider a priceless work of art. But for the monks these were not priceless works of art; they were devotional aids. In the corridors outside the cells, Fra Angelico painted three more frescoes for the whole monastic community. The most important of these he painted opposite the staircase which the monks used to go between their cells upstairs and the refectory and chapel downstairs. Several times each day the monks passed this painting; once each day they gathered in front of it to pray. The scene depicted in this fresco is the Annunciation.

Our visit to San Marco had a powerful and unanticipated impact on me. Ever since, I have been pondering the scene of monks passing this Annunciation fresco every day, and of gathering in front of it once each day to pay it deliberate attention. For the past six weeks I have been asking myself this question: How are you shaped and formed spiritually if every single day of your life you pay attention to the Annunciation? If you pay attention, not to admire Fra Angelico’s artistic greatness, which is what a modern art historian or an art history class would do, but as an act of devotion, so that what you’re pondering is the Biblical text behind the art? How does this shape you as a person?

One response to the Annunciation is to magnify Mary, to exalt her to a position of honor. The Catholic church’s exaltation of Mary is derived from this very text. The incarnation required the willing cooperation of an earthly partner. Mary fulfilled this role and so functioned as the co-redemptrix. As a result, she is now exalted and honored as Queen of Heaven. This exaltation of Mary in turn required the development of additional doctrine: her immaculate conception, perpetual virginity, and bodily assumption.

Exalted to the highest position in heaven alongside Father and Son, Mary is seen as an intercessor to whom petition can now be made in the words of the *Ave Maria* or “Hail Mary.” The first part of this prayer is drawn straight from Scripture: the angel’s greeting, “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you” (1:28), followed by Elizabeth’s greeting, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (1:42). But then a non-Biblical petition is added, “Mary, pray for us, for us sinners, now and at the hour, in the hour of our death.” But the New Testament makes it clear that there is only one intercessor, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, this exaltation of Mary completely misses the point of the passage. The whole point of the Annunciation type-scene is the inability of people, even God’s people, even Mary, to create life. The recipient of each annunciation is barren; this is as true of Mary as it was of Sarah, Hannah and Elizabeth. The creation of life out of barrenness requires the miraculous intervention of God. I believe that Mary is exalted in this text, but not in the way that much of the Church has subsequently exalted her. Luke portrays Mary as a model believer, who responds to God’s word with humble submission, placing herself at the disposal of the Lord. We too are to respond that way, for salvation is of the Lord, not of us. He is the one with whom nothing is impossible.

Another component of the message of the Annunciation is the profound mystery that God himself, through the agency of his Spirit, is sending his Son into the world. Many paintings of the Annunciation try to depict this Trinitarian involvement in the incarnation. They show a dove descending from the top center of the painting, from some representation of the Father—an outstretched hand, a blazing sun, or a window—towards Mary’s womb. Here is a profound mystery for us to contemplate. John begins his gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” Yet, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1-3, 14). This Son, eternally begotten of the Father, eternally present with the Father, through whom all things were created, humbled himself and became incarnate, taking on human flesh and form, “conceived by the Holy Spirit” as we recite in the Creed. This is a profound mystery worthy of our meditation.

The Magnificat (1:46-55)

Gabriel had told Mary that her relative Elizabeth was already in her sixth month of pregnancy. Mary hurried south from Nazareth into the hill country of Judea to visit her, a scene known as the Visitation. Elizabeth greeted her with a blessing, “Blessed are you among women...Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished” (1:42, 45). Again Mary is held up as the model of faith.

Mary’s response to Elizabeth’s praise is to burst into song, diverting Elizabeth’s praise upward to God.

And Mary said:

“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,
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;
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.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers.” (1:46-55)

For 1500 years this song has been known as the *Magnificat*, the opening word in the Latin version that for a thousand years was the standard text of the Western church: *Magnificat, anima meum Dominum*, “My soul doth magnify the Lord” in the KJV which was for several centuries the standard text of the English-speaking world.

Our generation prizes originality, but this song is not original. It is all drawn from the Old Testament, principally from Hannah’s song of praise when she dedicated Samuel to the Lord (1 Sam 2:1-10) and from the psalter. The song is in nine verses, each of two lines. I read the poem in four sections, turning on verse 51.

In the first section (46-48), Mary bursts into fulsome praise to God with every part of her being (soul and spirit) because he has revealed himself as her Savior. Though she is but his maidservant, he has taken notice of and interest in her humble state. The word translated humble, is used in the Old Testament to refer to the poor, usually in conjunction with another word “needy.” For example, in Psalm 35, read as our call to worship, David calls upon God to come to his salvation because “You rescue the poor from those too strong for them, the poor and needy from those who rob them” (Ps 35:10). The poor and needy did originally refer to those who were economically poor and destitute, but it took on a spiritual overtone, describing those who recognized their spiritual poverty and were longing for God to intervene in salvation. The poor and needy were those who had faith despite their circumstances, those who were responsive to God, those who were receptive to his salvation. Jesus would later pronounce a blessing on these “poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:3).

In the second section (49-51a), Mary moves on to describe how God has shown his salvation to his poor and needy maidservant. The Mighty One has done great things for her. There is a wordplay here which we can easily miss in English. The Mighty One is the one who is able to do things, the one for whom nothing is impossible (1:37). In the Old Testament, Is-

rael celebrated the great things that God had done on her behalf. She ran into trouble when “another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel” (Judg 2:10). By Mary’s time, these great things of the Lord were long in the past. She celebrates that he has acted again. What is it that he has done?

The turning point is in verse 51. The first line completes the thought of the great deeds of the Mighty One: he has shown strength with his arm. The second line introduces the third section (51b-53): the implications of these great deeds. He has put down the proud and exalted the humble, as illustrated in two examples. Here we have another play on the word for power: the Mighty One has deposed all rulers, or the Potent One has deposed all potentates. This means there is no room for any other rulers, any other kingdoms. In the first century this applied particularly to Rome. It applied especially to Augustus, acclaimed by the Roman world as the savior, the one who had brought peace to the world, the one who was called Augustus, worthy of reverence. The Savior is not the emperor ruling in Rome. The Savior is the seed miraculously conceived in this young virgin Mary.

What is this great deed that God has done? He didn’t come to Jerusalem. He didn’t come in great pomp and circumstance. His great deed is the seemingly insignificant act of the pregnancy of a young woman. Unnoticed by the potentates of the day, he has reversed the barrenness of this young woman.

In the fourth section (54-55), Mary returns to the theme with which she started: God has come in salvation to his poor and needy servant. In the first section, that poor and needy servant is Mary; in this fourth section the poor and needy servant is Israel. Mary recognizes that God’s great deeds on her behalf are really on behalf of all Israel. He has been mindful not only of her needy state but also of the needy state of Israel. All this is in accordance with his word, the word which he spoke to Abraham. In Mary’s song we have encapsulated a miniature biblical theology, that ties the Old Testament together and realizes it is reaching its fulfillment in the conception of this seed inside Mary.

The *Magnificat* was incorporated into the liturgy of the church at a very early date. In many liturgical traditions it is sung every day. For example in the Anglican church it is sung every day during Evening Prayer. For the past weeks, alongside my ponderings on the Annunciation, I have been pondering a second question. How are we shaped spiritually if every day for thirty or forty years we sing the *Magnificat*? How are we formed if every day all of our being gives praise to God because he has done great things, because he has been mindful of our poor and needy estate, and because the way he has acted is not to come in great pomp and circumstance but to come in seemingly insignificant acts, especially in that seemingly insignificant act of the conception of the son of God in the virgin’s womb? What understanding does this give us of how God operates in this world? Do we see that our response is to wait on

him in faithful submission and joyful praise? Mary’s response in the *Magnificat* parallels her response in the Annunciation. In both Mary is held up as a model believer for all of us who have faith.

In chapters 1-2, Luke presents not just Mary as a model of faith, but also Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Simeon and Anna. They sing. Mary sings the *Magnificat*. Zechariah, bursts into a song of praise when his speech is restored after the birth and naming of John: “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people” (1:68). The Church knows this as the *Benedictus*, from the opening word in Latin. Simeon, seeing Jesus in the temple, bursts into praise, “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation” (2:29-30). We know this as the *Nunc Dimittis*, from the first two words in Latin. The angels burst into song as they announce the birth of the Savior to the shepherds in the field, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (2:14). This is the *Gloria*, set to music almost as often as the *Magnificat*.

Luke shows these model believers singing their praise to God because he has brought salvation to his people. Some of the Church pays attention to this, singing these songs every day. Those traditions that sing the *Magnificat* every day usually also sing the *Benedictus* and *Nunc Dimittis* every day. They pay attention to these great acts that God has done, and they praise him.

I hold up for your consideration this Advent season the Annunciation and the *Magnificat*. I call on you to respond like Mary in faith and humble submission to the will of God. And I call on you to sing. So we will close by singing.

As we ponder the message of the Annunciation, we’ll sing *Let all mortal flesh keep silence*. We still ourselves and ponder the amazing truth of the eternal Son of God coming to earth, born of a virgin. This hymn was originally written as a Eucharistic hymn as part of the fifth-century liturgy of St James. Now it is usually sung as a Christmas carol.

Then we’ll sing another setting of the *Magnificat*, *Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord*, by the contemporary hymn-writer Timothy Dudley-Smith. I want you to go forth with that on your lips: telling out the greatness of the Lord for the great things that he has done.

Praise be to you, O Lord, the God of Israel, because you have come and have redeemed your people. Sovereign Lord, now dismiss your servants in peace, for our eyes have seen your salvation. (Luke 1:68; 2:30 mod.)

1. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 47-62.