

Magnifying and Mothering

The Gospel of Luke 1:46-55

This is one of the most well known pieces of poetry in scripture. The Song of Mary or The Magnificat is Luke's version of Mary's response to the news of her bearing Jesus from the Angel Gabriel. It is interesting that Luke has the Angel going to Mary, while Matthew has him talk to Joseph. In some ways this is not surprising as Matthew writes for a Jewish audience, and Luke, for a more worldly Gentile audience. The greater visibility and importance of the women in Luke's version indicates more willingness to move beyond the more patriarchal or male centered nature of Judaism at the time. But more about that later.

In this early part of his Gospel, Luke uses the voice of Mary to give us some of the main themes of his writing. First, that God chooses the most humble of servants to bring God's gifts to humanity. As we read in our Call to Worship, this song of Mary is a historical re-echo of the song of Hannah, the mother of the Great Prophet Samuel who anoints Kings Saul and David. Hannah, like Mary, was a woman of low status, a wife loved by her husband, but unable to bear children for him – a mark of shame in that time and culture. But God hears Hannah's prayer and Samuel is miraculously born and he serves God and the people his whole life long.. These two songs of women of low status are excellent examples of why Liberation Theology states that God works with "A preferential option for the poor." seeking to lift up the down-trodden. It is a radical aspect of the Gospel that the institutional church, especially in the eras of its great political and financial power, tended to forget or downplay, but it is central to the Gospel of Luke.

The second important theme from this well known scripture is the word, magnify. As we talked about with the kids, to magnify is to make bigger, make plain what is already there. So what about God do we see more clearly through Mary? This week I happened to watch a PBS program about Lourdes, the famous site of pilgrimage known for being a place of healing. Lourdes is a small town in France, famous for the Vision of Mary- Our Lady of Lourdes - said to have occurred in 1858 to Bernadette – a young

shepherdess who conversed with Mary. The show got me thinking about this phenomena of the appearances of Mary, and I did some research. I was surprised to find references to such visions of Mary going way back to 39 AD. In reading accounts of these visions, I realized that in its wisdom, God's people (and usually not church leaders, but some were) God's people have been able to see and sometimes hear a female messenger from God – a reflection of the feminine aspect of God for centuries. That is encouraging.

Unfortunately the church has had to develop theology around all this and that is where it has gotten into trouble. For example, the virginity of Mary - which by the way is only talked about in Matthew and Luke - is based on a translation of an Old Testament scripture about a young woman -that is the actual word a “Young Woman” conceiving a child. The Church, in trying to understand both how Jesus brings God to us and how we are forgiven, embraces a substitution view of Jesus death - and then Jesus must be somehow without sin, which eventually leads to saying Mary is without sin so she can bear Jesus and it goes on and on. This drive to nail down theology around the mysteries of God not only keeps many from faith, but detracts from the wonder, the mystery, and the beauty of faith.

Here's the good news; seeing God in a poor pregnant unmarried young woman does not require correct ideas about God, or the necessity of understanding it all, but a willingness to let the mystery of God change us, however God may come to us. Our celebration of Christmas is a chance for us to tell again the story of God's love for humanity – even the most vulnerable and humble of us. A chance to say again that even when things look bad, like having to give birth in a stable far from home and family... God can bring a bright light to shine in the gloom and darkness.

Christmas is a time when we celebrate God coming to us, however God chooses to do that. Through the story of a Babe in a feeding trough, through a young woman who was willing to have her life turned upside-down to bear the Christchild, through imagining stinky foul-mouthed shepherds listening to an angel choir in awe, through the

waters of a mercy-filled bath at Lourdes given by loving volunteers, through helping out a homeless man or woman, or a magnificent sunset over the Gulf of Mexico. God comes to us. Let us celebrate that. God comes to us in many, many ways, almost as many ways as there are people. Our job, our only job, is to be ready to receive the miracle, the vision, the hope, the love when it comes.

God is all around us, in people, in places, in other creatures – both heavenly stars and earthen starfish. Let us open our eyes to the coming of God this Christmas. AMEN

Luke 1:46-55

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.’