

Sermon for Sunday, December 13, 2009
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MAGNIFICAT
Luke 1:39-55

I want to talk about pastors' hair for a moment. Perhaps you noticed that Clay has grown a goatee – makes him look mature. Robbie has blond curly hair, which he doesn't like. Everyone who has curly hair wants straight hair and vice-versa. I don't like my hair because it looks too neat - I comb it about once a month and I wish it were messier. The neatness bothers me. It gives the impression that I want everything to be in order. Sometimes I think my hair is spreading lies about me. Life is messy; perfect order is unattainable. I wish my hair would say that.

This church building can deceive, too. When someone walks in, the building speaks to them. Much of what it says is true: We care about beauty, aesthetics, art! We have a heritage, tradition; we persevere. We long for transcendence.

The building says other things, too. To some, the rows seem to say, "take a seat and prepare for a presentation." No participation. For others, the beauty and the neat rows say, "everything is in order." We know it's not true. Or: "everything is orderly and if you want to fit here, you need to be orderly, too." That's also false.

We're glad for the beauty, but it can obscure important truths. Many of us come to church feeling anything but beautiful and orderly. We enter the Christmas season with burdens. Some are obvious, like looking for a job. Most burdens are hidden. Some people are single, happy and well-connected. Others are isolated and long to be part of a loving family. Others are in families - very unhappy families - and it seems that every other family is happy.

In Luke 1, things are not as they seem. We seem to have a simple sweet story. Miraculous conceptions and children leaping in the womb. The title is "Magnificat:" and the story looks magnificent, but Luke 1 also traces a journey from problems to hope. Things are not as they seem. They're messier than they look. Luke 1 is not a simple story of beauty and triumph, the story is darker than it seems.

As happy as Elizabeth and her house may be in 1:39, remember how their story began. Elizabeth's husband Zechariah was a priest and a righteous man. Priests rarely served in the temple – once or twice in a lifetime. Zechariah's turn came when he was an older man (1:5-10). He took the moment to pray about the central burden of his life: He and his wife, godly Elizabeth, were barren. In that day childlessness was a special grief.

Suddenly an angel appeared and said, "Zechariah, your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy... to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth... Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God" (1:13-16).

Now the sad part: Although Zechariah prayed for this very thing, in the very presence of God, he didn't believe it when the angel said, "Request granted." As his discipline, angel Gabriel struck him mute. When he emerged from the temple with a vision and a promise, he could tell no one.

Soon Elizabeth became pregnant – a great joy. Yet Zechariah remained mute for the length of the pregnancy. He couldn't even speak to his wife to share their joy, nor to say his speech would return. So there was joy, but unbelief and angst, too. And Luke doesn't tell us why, but Elizabeth secluded herself for the first five months of her pregnancy. There was joy, but also something was amiss.

Things were complicated for Mary, too. I hardly need tell you why. Here is a young woman, betrothed to her beloved, and pregnant, but not by that man. If anyone asked, would she even attempt to tell the truth? Who would believe her story? "An angel appeared to me and said, 'Mary, you have found favor [grace] 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... his kingdom will never end.'" (1:33).

"How will this be," Mary asked, "since I am a virgin?" (1:34)

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you... So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." (1:35)

Imagine Mary trying to outline that story to her neighbors. It was true, but people often refuse to believe the truth. They see how things look – bad – and that's enough for them. We forget that things aren't always as they seem. Please remember that the next time you are ready to judge based on a mix of appearances and guesswork. Remember that the next time there is someone like Mary near us – someone who seems so ripe for judgment.

Elizabeth was in seclusion, either for her privacy or her health. We imagine that Mary might want privacy, too. How brave of her Mary to tell the angel, "I am the Lord's servant... May it be to me as you have said" (1:38). Mary accepted her mission: No objections, no questions. She didn't ask for an easier task, didn't ask God to explain what would happen to her. God wanted her to do it; that's enough.

I wish it were enough for us, too – if we could lay aside selfish thoughts, personal calculation and more often say, "I am the Lord's servant."

Then Mary "arose and went with haste into the hill country in Judah." We may guess that she wanted to get away from gossips. But the angel said her relative Elizabeth was pregnant. Mary wanted to see her, to share their wonderful stories. She traveled over seventy miles, on foot, to see her and they rejoiced together.

The joy of Elizabeth (1:39-45)

It is long tradition to call the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth "the visitation." How blessed a season, as they shared the news of what God had done and what He promised to do. It was unique. Elizabeth bore a prophet who would bring Israel "back to the Lord their God." Mary bore the promised Son of David, the "Son of the Most High." Elizabeth had been childless. But when Mary entered her home and greeted her, her joy doubled.

"When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?'"

Every woman knows that babies kick and move; this was different. At this moment, John the Baptist and Jesus met. John, the great, final prophet of the old covenant and Jesus, Lord of the new covenant. As they met, the Spirit of God created a jolt of spontaneous joy. Later He gave His life to Jesus – to testify that he is the Christ. As his ministry ended, he said, "That joy is mine and now it is complete." Let it be a joy to us too, to testify that Jesus is the Christ.

So the baby leapt for joy. More than that, the Spirit filled Elizabeth and she cried out – a sign of explosive enthusiasm:

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (1:42-43). Here are several points. Take them in ascending order.

First, this is a sign that life begins in the womb. John recognized the Christ for whom he would prepare the way. "Not yet born, already John prophesies." ¹ He leapt or kicked for joy.

Second, we bless Mary. Her lot was hard. Joseph's, too. But see beyond the hardship. She is "blessed among women." John the Baptist leapt in the womb. As a man he said "A person cannot receive even one thing, unless it is given him from heaven" (John 3:29, English Standard Version (ESV)). No other woman was given this privilege – to carry the son of God in her womb and to nurture that child. Mary did a hard thing, but a great thing.

The movie "A League of Their Own" offers a fictionalized account of the women's baseball league of the 1940's. In the story the team's star catcher decides to quit just before the championship. "It just got too hard," she explains.

The manager, Tom Hanks, ignites and says, "Hard? It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it. The 'hard' is what makes it great." That is exactly right. Remember that next time God asks you to do something hard and great.

God doesn't leave Mary alone. Elizabeth stands by her. She is filled with joy for her own pregnancy and child, but she dwells on God's work in Mary: "Why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Mary is the mother of Jesus, her Lord. So she repeats what Gabriel told Mary: She has found favor – literally "grace" - with God (1:30). What a blessing to hear this confirmation!

So Elizabeth honors Mary. She doesn't worship her or pray to her or make her an intercessor or a sinless saint. Mary is blessed, but Elizabeth specifically blesses Mary's faith. Luke 1:45 says, "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

Mary stands in contrast to Zechariah, who didn't believe the angel who said he would have a son. Mary did believe the angel. How it blessed Mary to hear Elizabeth, her trusted relative, a godly older woman, say so!

Let us bless each other too. Encourage each other to believe what God says and to lay hold of it.

After she blesses Mary, Elizabeth blesses Jesus. "Blessed is the child you bear." She marvels that "the mother of my Lord" comes to her. The baby Jesus is Elizabeth's Lord and God. Rarely does the Bible call the Son of David and Messiah "Lord."

It took the disciples many months fully to realize that Jesus is "Lord and God." Indeed the Bible says he was publicly crowned and declared Son of God and Lord at the resurrection (Romans 1:4, Acts 2:32-36). We see Jesus most clearly in his death for our sins, his resurrection for our life.

But the Spirit of God revealed Jesus' identity to Elizabeth ahead of time. She believed it, then she said it to Mary to confirm Mary's faith – and ours.

Elizabeth's speech shows the joy of people who recognize the Lord. May we walk in faith as Elizabeth did. She was joyful for herself, but she rejoiced more in the joys of others. What selflessness! How she blessed Mary and us. How she was blessed as a result. Above all, may we share her blessing when we recognize the Lord.

¹ Ryken, *Maximus of Turin*, page 69).

Mary blesses the Lord (1:46-50)

Mary takes it all in and bursts into praise. Her poem is called the “Magnificat” because that's the first word in the Latin. Greek is the same. Her poem is full of muscular language, strong verbs open line after line: Magnifies, rejoices, visits.

46 My soul magnifies the Lord.

47 My spirit rejoices in the Lord, my Savior.

48 He has looked on the humiliation of his servant.

51 He has scattered the proud.

52 He has pulled the mighty from their thrones and exalted the humble.

It's a long poem. Like an aria in an opera, it stops the action. But it's not an interruption. Luke wants us to slow down and savor what is happening, understand and celebrate what God is doing.

Mary was just a teenager, since most Israelites married before they were twenty, but she was mature beyond her years. It is a great poem inspired by the Spirit and drenched in Scripture. She taps into 1 Samuel 2, where Hannah praises God, "My soul exults in the Lord." She praises God for the child He granted her after many childless years with the prophet Samuel. Mary cites Genesis, Isaiah, and Psalms... Her parents and teachers taught her Scripture. She treasured it in her heart. Now it is on her lips. May parents so bless their children.

May we all know and speak the language of Scripture and think God's way!

In the poem, Mary says nothing specific about her Son. Why not? Because she wants to praise the character, then the actions of God. "Mary had the godliness to look beyond her gift and to praise the God who gave it." She praised God and deflected praise from herself. She praised God for who He is, not for what He does for her. She begins as so many Psalms do. She praises God, then explains why.

She says it twice in parallel lines of poetry: "My soul glorifies the Lord; My spirit rejoices in God my Savior." She praises God for four great attributes:

1. She worships him in his mighty power. "The Mighty One has done great things... He has performed mighty deeds with his arm" (1:49, 51).
2. He is holy. Holy is His name. That's His very character. It shows in deeds.
3. His mercy extends to sinners (1:50).
4. Because of His faithfulness, He keeps promises and shows covenant mercy to His people (1:54-55). So Mary praises the mighty, holy, merciful faithful God

Mary certainly notices what God has done for her, just as we notice what God does for us. But her first instinct is to praise God as He is. Then to praise Him for what He has done.

3. The Lord scatters the proud and exalts the humble (1:50-55).

Mary says God has lifted up the humble. "He looked upon the humble estate of his servant" (1:48 ESV). Mary was a peasant girl from an unknown family in a scorned town in a backwater region. "She was nobody from nowhere and she knew it." ²

Beyond that, she was a sinner, in need of mercy like everyone else. But she is thinking of her people too: family, friends, husband, generations past and generations to come: "His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation" (1:50). This is the last personal word in her song. She speaks of

² Ryken, *Maximus of Turin*, page 76.

God's ways with the world. He scatters the proud, brings down rulers and lifts up the humble. Why? Because the proud, the rulers, live a lie and it corrupts them.

- Pharaoh thought he was god on earth; God brought him down through Moses.
- Goliath said no man could beat him in one-on-one combat; David brought him down.
- The King of Babylon boasted, "Is this not great Babylon that I have built?" But the Persians brought down his reign and God humbled him.

Luke 1:50-55 is past tense: God "scattered the proud [and] brought down the mighty." Perhaps Mary is thinking of Israel's past, when God humbled Egyptians, Philistines, Babylonians. Maybe she speaks of the future – a future so sure, that she speaks of it as past. The poem is about the present, too. God already started to lift up the humble – Mary is a case in point. So the poem seems to speak to the past, present and future.

Luke 1:51-53 says God humbles the proud. He humbles pride of intellect; they are "proud in the thoughts of their hearts." He humbles the pride of position; "He has brought down rulers." He humbles the pride of wealth. "He sends the rich away empty." Intellect, position and wealth represent all human boasts. We could add training, social rank, influence, even morality. The point remains the same. God humbles the proud – tyrants, oppressors, the experts.

The whole book of Luke shows that God turns standards of greatness upside down. The gospel is the story of the great reversal.

- Luke 16. A rich man goes to hell, while a diseased beggar who sat outside his gate goes to heaven.
- Luke 18. God does not hear the prayer of the religious elite – the Pharisee; he hears the prayer of a sinner who beats his breast, "Have mercy on me, a sinner."
- Luke 23-24. Jesus who took the form of a servant, was beaten half to death, then crucified, but God exalted him and gave him a name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess.

Thus, at Christmas, the Son of God, King of kings is born in a stable Jesus explains: "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

This means that in one sense of the word, Christians cannot be conservatives. There are reasons to be a moral or political conservative. But think: at the deepest level, God does not want to conserve what is in all its sin. Neither should we. We are radicals. We want to go to the root of the human problem and promote and pray for new things.

God humbles the proud. Proud nations, proud dictators. Was there ever a man more proud than Mao Zedong? Within days of his death, his closest advisors were deposed and arrested and new leaders began to reverse his policies.

God even humbles proud churches, proud schools, proud hospitals, proud athletes. "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." The son of God is born in a stable. Let everyone who is humble, poor, and forgotten laugh for joy.

God fills the hungry with good things. "He helped his servant Israel." By faith, we are the Israel of God. God loves, welcomes, helps the humble, the hungry.

Some of us are physically hungry, call on God and expect him to help. If you have plenty, humble yourself to care for the poor. Others are spiritually hungry. If so, let God feed you and establish you. Others are emotionally hungry. Turn to God for peace.

Let me tell you that the Lord has done this for me and he can do it for you. This fall, I shared a few stories from my broken childhood. Here's another sliver. My father was a pastor, but he hated Christmas. He hated decorations, hated programs, music, pageantry, candlelight services. He hated the notion that he was obligated to get presents for people. So he didn't. I don't think he ever purchased a Christmas gift for his sons. His hatred of Christmas was like a toxin that spread through the house. Mother did what she could - a few gifts and decorations, a tasty meal. But Christmas was usually pretty miserable.

From the age of seven to eighteen, I was hungry and wounded, but proud. I refused to admit that the chaos hurt me. I could endure. I certainly didn't need sympathy. By social standards, I was humble and poor but I denied it. Then in a span of five months, God humbled me, so he could show me mercy and fill me with good things.

I won't deny that remnants of the past trouble me occasionally, but life is different; Christmas is different. Now my beloved tries to keep me well dressed; Christmas marks the epicenter of her efforts. One daughter still draws me pictures that warm my heart. Another carefully chooses music I'll appreciate. God gave me this family. We drink hot chocolate, sing three part harmony, go to Christmas Eve services, and then eat a meal where we share signature dishes.

It's all a gift. If someone wants to open a present on Christmas Eve, that's OK, because no procedure manual governs the question. (Too many rules can ruin things). It's far from perfect. But it's good, and better than it was!

Is your story like mine? No, but yes. Yes, because every redemptive story shares certain themes. Brokenness and pride exist side by side. The pride is supposed to mask the pain, but it makes it worse. Things look better than they are. The Slinky and Play Doh were both accidents. Many of our accomplishments are. Give it up, humble yourself, in the true spirit of Jesus and Christmas.

"The Mighty One has done great things for [us]— holy is His name. His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation... He has lifted up the humble [and] helped His servant Israel."