

The Magnificat

Mary was very young, about Abby's age ... maybe a year younger. She had been engaged to be married to a man named Joseph - she would not have had a say in that engagement; it would have been arranged by her father. During the engagement, the couple were considered to belong to each other, and were expected to be completely faithful to each other.

But Mary had become pregnant. The story is a familiar one, starting with the visit of the angel Gabriel to announce to Mary that she had been chosen to give birth to a son who would be known as the Son of the Most High, who would be granted the throne of His ancestor David and who would reign over an everlasting Kingdom. Mary's response was amazing: "I am the Lord's servant and I am willing to accept whatever He wants. May everything you have said come true."

When we looked at Matthew's genealogy that opens his gospel, we noted that God was raising up those who would have been overlooked, the outcasts, the poor, the despised, and giving them dignity, giving them an important role to play in salvation-history. Here is Mary, a young girl engaged to be married to a man she hasn't chosen, asked by God to become the focus of gossip and judgment from all her neighbours, and she says, "Whatever the Lord wants, I'm willing to do."

Many years ago, when I was at New Life, I acted in a two-person play with a girl named Aaron Turnbull. I was the angel delivering the news and she was a belligerent, hostile young girl who wanted nothing to do with giving birth to an illegitimate child. She accused the angel of trying to ruin her life, derail all her plans and take away all that she valued. It was a fun play to do and she was finally won over and agreed to submit to God's plan for her life, but it also helped us see into Mary's world, into the great cost that this would mean to her. She would lose the love and respect of her community. She would be accused falsely and have to bear the judgments of others. She could see all that clearly, and yet, ultimately, was willing to pay the price so that God's richer, fuller plan for the whole world could be realized.

Just a few days after this announcement, Mary went to visit her relative Elizabeth, who was also unexpectedly pregnant - she was getting on in years - and they had quite an encounter. Let's read:

She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. (That happens a lot in Luke's account of the birth of Jesus - people keep being filled with the Spirit). Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, "You are blessed by God above all other women, and your child is blessed. What an honour this is, that the mother of my Lord should visit me! When you came in and greeted me, my baby jumped for joy the instant I heard your voice! You are blessed, because you believed that the Lord would do what He said."

(Luke 1:40b-45)

The beginning of the blessing. God had promised to bless His people, He had promised that all nations on earth would be blessed through a descendant of Abraham and He had sent the angel Gabriel to tell Mary that God had decided to bless her. And now Elizabeth tells Mary that she is blessed because she believed that word from the Lord God. Notice that this is the same message that Paul was preaching to the Galatians, that “believing” is the key to “blessing”. And notice that Elizabeth, having just been filled with the Holy Spirit, is given a prophetic gift and calls the tiny, just starting to develop, child within Mary’s womb “my Lord”. “What an honour this is, that the mother of my Lord should visit me!”

This is the backdrop to Mary’s praise-filled and prophetic response to Elizabeth, known through history, especially in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, as “The Magnificat”. Despite the joyful words of Elizabeth and her warm and encouraging greeting, Mary must have had many moments of anxious wondering as she travelled to the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. She must have thought many times of the reaction she would get when her parents found out, when Joseph found out, that she was pregnant. There are lots of people today who don’t believe in a virgin birth - it wasn’t any different back then. In fact, it had never happened before, so her story was even more unbelievable. Nevertheless, this is Mary’s response:

*Oh, how I praise the Lord
How I rejoice in God my Saviour
For He took notice of His lowly servant girl
And now generation after generation will call me blessed
For He, the Mighty One, is holy
And He has done great things for me.
His mercy goes on from generation to generation, to all who fear Him.
His mighty arm does tremendous things!
How He scatters the proud and haughty ones!
He has taken princes from their thrones
And exalted the lowly
He has satisfied the hungry with good things
And sent the rich away with empty hands
And how He has helped His servant Israel!
He has not forgotten His promise to be merciful
For He promised our ancestors - Abraham and his children - to be merciful to
them forever. (Luke 1:46b-55)*

Her first response to anyone other than the angel - I suspect she hadn’t told anyone else yet - is this outburst of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. It’s really quite amazing. She overlooks the challenges that this unusual birth will bring into her life, and embraces the promises - still unseen - as the true perspective on what she will be going through in the very near future. The promises, after all, are from God, and the fears and difficulties are from people.

Don’t you find that incredibly mature, and spiritually deep from a girl just coming into her teen years?

Oh how I praise the Lord. How I rejoice in God my Saviour

And she thanks God for taking notice of her, a lowly servant girl, a person of no great importance in this world and giving her the prestigious honour of bearing His Son.

When we talk about faith, the faith of Abraham or of Elijah or of Jesus' followers, this is a brilliant picture of what they expressed through words and actions. They chose to believe what God had promised and stepped out as if it was a sure thing. Abraham believed that God would make him into a great nation and David believed God's promise to give him an everlasting Kingdom. Elijah believed that God would send fire and burn up the sacrifices on Mount Carmel and set up a duel with the prophets of Baal. This confidence in God and in His word releases Mary to respond with joy and gratitude and praise.

In the next couple of verses she expresses the greatness of God. She describes in particular how responsive He is to those who trust Him.

*He, the mighty One, is holy
He has done great things for me
His mercy goes on from generation to
generation to all who fear Him. (49,50)*

God has done - notice the past tense - "has done" great things for her AND He will continue to show mercy to generation after generation of people who respect Him, who honour Him, who respond to God as He's worthy of being responded to. She has been brought up with a profound respect for God, for His character, the way He deals with His people and honours His promises. She has no doubt that He will be gracious to her - so much so that she can begin celebrating before she can see the end result.

Now, I mentioned last week that Matthew's gospel, even in the genealogy at the beginning, hints strongly that this "good news" story is going to be one of upheaval, of massive change, of a reordering of society. The women who are mentioned in the lists of the generations that led to Jesus' birth are women who suffered some level of shame, of being an outsider, of being labelled by the insiders. But they are now listed as ancestors of God's greatest gift, His own Son, and so their status in history is changed. Mary's song continues this kind of upheaval theme, the sides being switched, the stories being rewritten.

*How He scatters the proud and haughty ones!
He has taken princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly.
He has satisfied the hungry with good things
And sent the rich away with empty hands (51b-53)*

This is not the first place in Scripture where you read about the proud being at odds with the LORD God. Even back in Proverbs we read what both Peter and James include in their short letters, that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. In Isaiah we read that God lives in a high and holy place, but also with the person who is contrite and humble. And now, as we begin the story of Jesus, as He is about to enter the stage of human history, we read these incredibly important words from God's heart. He is not the one who feels the need to back up human pride and

make us look good all the time. Instead, His heart goes out to the broken, the humble, those who don't think too highly of themselves. He exalts the lowly, Mary says. He satisfies the hungry with good things. He took notice of His lowly servant girl.

Now, in light of that picture of God's grace to those who are poor and humble, I just want to mention a couple of things that put this song of Mary into a more modern perspective. Archbishop William Temple, who led the Church of England through some important times in the first half of the 20th century, used to say to the missionaries who were going out from England to India, "You probably shouldn't read the Magnificat out loud in public." Before 1989, when the Berlin Wall came crashing down and no shots were fired to prevent its destruction, it was illegal to read the Magnificat from the pulpits of Eastern Europe. And Darrell Johnson tells the story of when he was a missionary in the Philippines and the local priests warned him against reading the Magnificat aloud during the Christmas season. What on earth did the powers that be have against this song?

It's a song of revolution, of a new order taking the place of the old order, of the powerful being removed and the weak and humble rising into the joy of God's loving care. It directly threatens the wealth and power of this world order.

How He scatters the proud and haughty ones!

He has taken princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. (51b, 52)

Who wants to exalt the lowly? Do you think there's a politically powerful person out there today who wants God to take him or her from their position of power and exalt someone of no stature into that position? Or who wants God to satisfy the hungry with good things and send the rich away with empty hands? Who does that?

The revolution that claimed to have that in mind, the Red Revolution of 1917 in Russia, ended like any other political entity, with the powerful becoming more wealthy and more powerful and the poor and lowly becoming poorer. As George Orwell noted in his satire on communism called [Animal Farm](#) - how many read that one in high school - everyone's equal, but some are more equal than others.

This song of Mary challenges the entrenched powers of our world and praises a God who turns things on their head. She knows what He is doing in her life and is amazed by it. But she also seems to see into His bigger plan and it excites her. It's very impressive to think that the words of a 12 or 13-year old girl could put such conviction and fear into modern empires that they would seek to shut her brief song of praise out of the public arena. And it stands as a rebuke to human pride that we would attempt to keep the world from knowing and praising her God.

You can say it this loudly and clearly and confidently: Jesus is the hope for change in this world. There is no political solution, no economic solution, no technological solution to the problems that we face - sin, selfishness, pride, anger, fear, lust, hatred. There will not be a political solution to the problems of inequality, unless there is a change in the human heart - and only Jesus has shown the power to make that kind of

change. Mary sees it and praises Him for it - "Oh how I praise the Lord; how I rejoice in God my Saviour!"

In the last two verses of this song, she demonstrates again her confident faith in the promises God has made, both in history, and now through her life:

*And how He has helped His servant Israel!
He has not forgotten His promise to be merciful
For He promised our ancestors - Abraham and his children
To be merciful to them forever. (1:54,55)*

Yes, God made those promises to Abraham and his children after him, to bless them, to give them hope, to be in covenant relationship with them, His people. But Mary sees Him fulfilling this promise now, through her: "How He has helped His servant Israel!" Yes, the child she is carrying is the answer, the fulfillment, of His promise. And she sees this gift, just as the angel had told her, as the promised Messiah, the One who would reign over Israel forever, the One whose Kingdom would never end.

Truly believing the promises of God naturally leads you into an experience of joy. When there's no doubt that God is on the move and that He's going to be faithful to His promises, there's a lot to celebrate. The Magnificat is a celebration of the faithfulness of God. It celebrates His love of justice and His mercy towards the poor. It is a celebration of a new world coming, one where God is King and the people live in peace because He is good.

What, then, are the applications for us today? What should we think or do differently because Mary sang this song to her cousin Elizabeth when her baby, who would grow up to be known as John the Baptist, leaped in his mother's womb as Mary and her child greeted them? I think this passage is pretty rich in applications, but I'll just mention four:

1. Number one: I like that Mary lives with a confidence that she serves a God who is fully trustworthy. There were, I'm sure, a few hard moments for her when the angel was telling her how, exactly, God wanted to bless her. I'm sure she could see that this plan wasn't going to go over well with her folks or her fiancée. But when she greeted Elizabeth, she had put that to rest. She was God's favoured one and from now on, generation after generation would call her blessed. Do we trust that God cares about us, that He is taking notice of our needs, that He hears our prayers? Scripture tells us that He does, all of those things, and our lives will be a whole lot fuller if we can trust Him, especially in the tough places.
2. Number two: Mary has observed something about God that she weaves throughout her song - He is a God of mercy. "His mercy goes on from generation to generation" ... "He has not forgotten His promise to be merciful" ... "He promised our ancestors to be merciful to them forever." I like that she recognizes that we need mercy from God ... and that He is merciful. If you or I become obsessed with the idea that God has run out of mercy for us, our lives become miserable and hopeless. But Mary shows us that this isn't the way to understand God's character: He is merciful and kind, He shows compassion, He renews hope.

3. Number three: one of my favourite themes in Scripture, one I always want to be learning from, is this idea that God can't resist the person with a humble heart. Last week we saw that Yahweh God was moved when He heard Manasseh's confession and saw his humility in the face of the punishment he had received from the Assyrians. If God can be moved, can feel something, for a man who was the worst king Judah ever had, the worst idolater who ever ruled God's people, then don't you think He can be moved with compassion for you when you fail and then return to Him in humility? Psalm 51:17 tells us that God will not despise a broken and repentant heart - in fact, that's what He is looking for. So, number three is to come to God in humility, in real sorrow for sin, in the humility that says, "I'm not doing as well as I'd like. Please fill me anew"
4. Number four: Be content. Don't anxiously pursue all the status and wealth and influence that others build their identity around. Be content to be a child of God who is happy to be known as a child of God. Don't spend your life restlessly pursuing something that isn't there, some sense of fulfillment or ownership or power that isn't the reason God put you here on earth. Those things can bring some satisfaction, to be sure, but they are not ultimate, not the big picture things that make you who you are and give you the fulfilling knowledge that you're in the right place doing the things you were made to do with people who love God and who love you, too.