

“Where Do I Begin?”

Luke 1:46-55

Pastor Jeff Fox-Kline | Sermon for Sunday, December 19, 2021

I love this scripture passage. It ranks among my favorites, though for some reason it is not one of the ones I turn to when looking to quote scripture. The passage that we're reading today is called the Magnificat, and is Mary's song of praise to God. This comes after Mary is told that she's pregnant and wants to visit her family member Elizabeth. Now you may remember from a couple weeks ago (or you may not), that Elizabeth was miraculously pregnant as well, carrying the child that we will eventually know as John the Baptist. And it's amongst these two women that this song unfolds. When Mary arrives Elizabeth says “the child in my womb leaped for joy” and it is in this moment that Mary sings the incredible song:

Luke 1:46-55:

⁴⁶ 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.

What a beautiful encapsulation of what God does for us. She rejoices in God's favor for her, the blessing that she has received. She celebrates the goodness of God. But she doesn't just stop at what God does for her specifically. No, she understands that God's grace is not just hers. God's work is not for her, but for all. God's mercy is for all generations. And then she gets fiery in the kind of way that the best prophets do. God scatters the proud, brings down the powerful, lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry, sending away the rich.

Wow, it's awesome. And like I said, it's one of my favorites. So why do I default to Micah 6:8, or Matthew 25 when I want to talk about God's pursuit of justice?

Unfortunately, I think I know the answer to this question.

Think about every Christmas pageant that you've seen. The angels announce, the shepherds quake and seek, the wise men journey and present their gifts. Heck, even the innkeeper gets the chance to talk about the lack of vacancies.

But what does Mary say? Here's a rundown of Mary's lines in most Christmas pageants...

There, that's it. Nothing. She's the silent mother while everybody stops by to talk at her about her baby.

Why don't I think of the Magnificat when I think of the fire of the prophets? Of God casting down the proud and powerful? Because we like to make it so that Mary doesn't count.

It's true in our pageants, and it's true in our music.

What do we know about Mary through our best Christmas songs? Check this out:

“Oh Holy Night” – we get the angels, we get the wise men, we get Jesus. No Mary.

“Silent Night” – She’s a virgin, and she has a child.

“In the Bleak Midwinter” – Mary is blissful and kisses her baby.

“Hark the Herald Angels Sing” – I’ll give this one a pass, it’s mostly just about what the angels are saying.

“O Come All Ye Faithful” – angels again. No Mary.

“O Little Town of Bethlehem” let’s us know that Mary is Jesus’ mom.

“Once in Royal David’s City” tells us about how mild Mary was.

“Away in A Manger” is more concerned with what the cows say than Mary.

What do we sing about when we sing about Mary? She’s mild, virginal, and a mom. If I were to describe Mary based on the Magnificat, I wouldn’t use the word mild at all. She’s at the very least medium, but more likely spicy. Seriously, we have more information about what percussion we think was at the manger, than the person doing the actual work of giving birth.

And then we come to Mary Did You Know. Really. Mary did you know? Yes. Move on. Don’t make Mary an idiot just because you want to prove you know about Jesus. Ugh.

Mary was the first person to know about how special Jesus would be. She told us. If we had just listened. But we won’t, because the visual of a quiet little mother makes us feel better than some 14-year-old girl talking about how God is going to tear down the thrones and exalt the lowly. That makes us uncomfortable, because we need Mary to be a vessel, not a prophet. We need Mary to be an empty slate on which we can write all our mythology about some perfect painless birth. But that bleaches the reality of the Christmas story, it domesticates the revolutionary nature of what happened that night. We don’t want to think about Christmas this

way. Because we don't want Jesus to cause labor pains, because we think that a perfect baby is preferable to a real human. As Nancy Duff said in her reflections on Mary "romanticized images of the baby Jesus – undisturbed by the sounds of the animals that surrounded him – cannot muffle the cries of labor, conceal the pain and bloodiness of giving birth, or make acceptable the scandal of delivering a child in a place intended for the feeding and sheltering of animals"

But when we try to muffle those sounds, we lose the beauty and power of Mary mother of Jesus. We throw out the mother with the bathwater, so to speak.

I'm a Presbyterian. I'm very Presbyterian. And in the spirit of the Reformed Tradition, I do not venerate the saints. One of the outcomes of the reformation is that we no longer ask for intercession from official, canonized saints. Instead, we recognize that we are all saints and sinners. None of us better or worse than the other in the eyes of a merciful and loving God. I like that. But I sometimes wonder if we've gone too far in the opposite direction. That by declaring everyone a saint, we lose some of the spark that is inspired in us from exemplars of the faith. It's because of this that I think we've lost track of who Mary is, while the Catholics still have her on really firm footing. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death". Sound familiar? I know our Catholic (or former Catholic) friends were able to recite it along with me. By lifting Mary up as an example, then we are able to actually see the example she sets. I had the distinct honor of performing a wedding for two friends of mine. They are both very Catholic but weren't able to be married in the Catholic church, and so they asked me to work with them on a wedding service. As part of the service they wanted to include a time of veneration for Mary. I had no experience with this before, not being a Catholic priest, but they provided words for me to use that I want to share:

"We now ask that you join in a few moments of quiet reflection as we honor Mary, the mother of God and co-redeemer of the world.

When Mary chose to say yes to the call of God in her life, she did so

knowing that she would face ridicule and ostracization in her community and church.

She trusted in God and found strength and support in family like Elizabeth -who rejoiced with her friends like Joseph -who trusted her and even strangers like Simeon and Anna -who recognized the holiness of her life.

Mary is an example of holiness, yes, but also of the trust, courage and humble, unapologetic confidence required to live authentically. And of the miracles brought to life when we choose to follow her example.”

This is the Mary that I want to see in the manger. A woman who responds to God’s call, who knows the courage that it takes to follow through, and whose faithfulness gives her words to declare powerful truths about God. I’m not saying we are to worship Mary. That’s not our tradition, and our worship is directed towards the triune God. But once again, when we try to make things fit into our neat little box, we end up losing something vital. We don’t need to venerate Mary, but we do need to celebrate Mary. We need to learn from Mary, to try to replicate her faith, courage, and wisdom. When the angel came to Mary she was ‘perplexed’, according to Luke. Let’s try to stay perplexed by God’s inscrutable plans, keeping a sense of wonder. When the angel said that she was going to be pregnant, she was questioning. And so let us always remember to question, not accepting blindly but always seeking to understand. And when the angel told her that nothing is impossible with God she declared “Here I am, the servant of the Lord”. And so let us remember that in the wondering, the perplexity, and the questions, that we are here, servants of the Lord.

Her song starts with her declaring her lowliness. From now on all generations will call her blessed. In that moment, in the beginning there was the word, but in this beginning, there was Mary’s words. Not the Mary in the songs, who nods, smiles, kisses, and kneels. The Mary who sets the world on fire, the Mary who taught her son that God’s strength is in service, that God lifts the lowly, that the rich are to be sent empty, that the hungry are to be fed, that the powerful must be brought low. If she taught Jesus that, then why do we feel like we don’t need to learn from her?