

## MARY'S GOSPEL

Luke 1:38-55

A Sermon Preached by Robert E. Dunham

First Presbyterian Church

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The pastor-author Herbert O'Driscoll tells of how, when he was a young child growing up in Ireland, his parents would take him to his grandfather's farm near Castlecomer in County Kilkenny, where he cherished his encounters with his grandfather, but also with his grandfather's hired man, John Brennan. O'Driscoll writes:

John lived in a thatched cottage about half a mile away. In the evening after the cows were milked, he would sit on a large flat stone outside the stable door and smoke a stained clay pipe. Sometimes I would sit beside him and he would tell me stories.

One story John told me I never forgot. He told me to look up into the sky. Summer evenings in Ireland are very long. The moon had appeared, still ghostlike because the light of the sun was not fully gone. Here and there, the odd star could be seen.

"Do you know?" said John, puffing on his pipe, "Do you know that the stars and the sun and moon move around all the time?" I said I did. "Well," said John, "do you know how the angel Gabriel came to Mary the mother of our Lord to tell her she would have a child?" I said I did. "Well then," said John, looking skyward as he spoke, with my eyes following his gaze, "Do you know that when the angel asked Mary if she would bear the holy child, all the stars and the sun and the moon stopped moving until she gave Gabriel her reply? And when she said yes, they all began to move again. Did you know that?" said John triumphantly.<sup>1</sup>

In one sense, the events Luke records in these verses seem like the normal reports of an extended-family relationship between two women – one younger, one a bit older – both of them pregnant. It's about family, and babies' first kicks, and shared experiences. Yet, in another sense, even the stars in their courses might have held their collective breath, while the future of humankind rested on the answer of a teenaged girl. It soon becomes clear that this is no ordinary pregnancy.

In this liturgical year, which began several weeks ago on the First Sunday of Advent, the gospel of emphasis is the Gospel of Luke. If we are going to understand

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert O'Driscoll, "Let It Be: Luke 1:39-55," *Christian Century*, December 13, 2003, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2003-12/let-it-be>, accessed December 20, 2018.

Luke's Gospel, we are going to need to grasp the songs that inaugurate its story. And if we are going to understand its songs, there is one song in particular we must grasp. It is the song of Mary we read just a moment ago, more commonly called by the Latin word with which it begins: *Magnificat*. "My soul magnifies the Lord," is how it begins. In this song, says Princeton's James Kay, Mary

tells of her Savior who has "looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." *Lowliness*. The Greek behind [that] English word is not talking simply about humility, but about poverty. Mary is poor – dirt poor. She is poor and pregnant and unmarried. She is in a mess. But she sings! Why? Because Luke knows – from the vantage point of the end – that this lowly one, this wretched one, this woman, God raises up. Mary, despised and rejected, is favored by God and will bring the Messiah to birth. And so, she sings.

What is more, Mary sings not just a solo aria about her own destiny, but a freedom song on behalf of all the faithful poor in the land. She sings a song of freedom for all who, in their poverty and their wretchedness, still believe that God will make a way where there is no way. Like John the Baptist, Mary prophesies deliverance; she prophesies about a way that is coming in the wilderness of injustice. She sings of a God who "has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts"; who "has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly"; who "has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." .... Here at the beginning, Mary rejoices in God's destiny – for her, and for a world turned upside down.<sup>2</sup>

As beautifully as the aria begins, it turns in the end on some very troubling images. This is no lovely Christmas carol; in fact, it's not like any other carol we sing in these days. This is, as one contemporary carol has it, a "Canticle of the Turning" – the libretto of the great reversal of the best hopes and dreams of so many, maybe including ourselves. Thus, it is also a vocal overture that captures the themes that will echo throughout Luke's Gospel. And, if we are to stay in the church of the One Mary will carry to birth, it is music we need to learn to sing for ourselves, even though, as a pastor-friend has said, it is a song that makes all of us self-conscious:

I know with my health insurance and pension program, my comfortable house with heat and lighting, my ability to buy too many Christmas gifts for too many people, my new car and retirement nest egg that I am on precarious ground in Mary's judgment. This is not easy to hear. But if you and I are ever going to get the full impact of what Christmas is about, we have to stay and listen to the whole [song]. Even if it makes us uncomfortable. Even if we cannot applaud what

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<sup>2</sup> James F. Kay, *Christian Century*, December 10, 1997, 1157.

Mary sings. Because the real hope, the true joy of Christmas has to do with the truth Mary tells us.<sup>3</sup>

What is that truth? It is that the reign of God does not rest upon the same underpinnings as the world we have created. It is that the way we assess net worth is a far cry from the way God measures such things. It is that God values even the poorest, most helpless among us as much as God values you and me, and maybe... maybe even with preferential treatment. It is that the Christ came into this world not to baptize our acquisitiveness and our insatiable appetite for more and better and brighter and faster, but to usher in a reign that would make certain everyone had enough. As Jon said,

It is our obsession with the worldly that is called into question by Christ's coming. It is our constant focus on our status in the community, the prestige of our position at the office, ... the clubs we belong to, the value of our [home], the schools [our kids attend], the vacations we take, and the retirement community we can afford when we retire. God help us; we have come to believe that all that has something to do with how valuable we are as human beings, our worth, and our worthiness!

Mary cuts the legs right out from under us and [sings] that God comes to us not because we are worthy, or deserving, not because we've earned it. [God] comes ... *to our poverty*, to that within us which is *needy*. [God] comes to those places within our lives which are broken, not whole. To that within us which is destitute, not rich. To that within us which is poverty-stricken, not independently wealthy.<sup>4</sup>

Mary's Gospel is a song. It is a cosmic song and a personal song that unnerves us, yet has the power to set us free. It is a song laden with hope especially for the poor – the materially poor, the financially poor – the poor. But it is also a song that speaks to our own poverty, and thus a song we can *all* learn to sing. It is a song of devotion, a song of reversal of expectations, a song of hope that can lift us out of the inane acquisitiveness of these days. It is, to be sure, a hard carol to sing in these days... a bit dissonant to our ears. So, if we are going to sing with Mary, we are going to need to sing together, and we are going to need her help. Says Jim Kay,

She will have to take the lead. But if Mary and her God can have one Sunday a year, her singing may be a sign that the Holy Spirit who visited Nazareth so long ago is not yet finished with us. Perhaps the Holy Spirit... might yet convict even us, so high and so lifted up, so vain and so proud, and so shriveled in our own humanity. How far we are from the kingdom!

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<sup>3</sup> Jon Walton, "Repeat the Sounding Joy," a sermon preached December 21, 1997 at the Westminster Presbyterian Church of Wilmington, Delaware.

<sup>4</sup> Walton, op. cit.

And yet, here is hope – even for the likes of us. If Mary sings this Advent, perhaps we will finally know that every song of the future apart from hers is simply off key. Every future projected apart from Mary’s God has no future – it is doomed, and it is damned. But if Mary’s song is the Advent song, then her God has a future, and her God will bring us the future. And this is the point of Advent – indeed, this is the turning point – not only for Mary, but for us all.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, that turning point also carries a caveat: this is not a song we can sing earnestly, not a turning point we can embrace, without it changing us. To sing this song is to see the world in a new way. To embrace the child the song celebrates is to let go of other strivings, other obsessions... so as to be able to sing His song more passionately and honestly.

Tomorrow night on Christmas Eve we will make the rather brisk liturgical move from this morning’s annunciation and *Magnificat* to another song in Luke – to the *Gloria* the angels sang to the shepherds. Tomorrow night we will tell again the old, old story of Bethlehem: of Mary and Joseph and Caesar Augustus, of the inn and the stable, the animals and the swaddling cloths.

There is a remarkable poem about that night, written by Stephen Vincent Benét for a 1942 Christmas radio broadcast called *A Child Is Born*; it is a poem Benét put on the lips of the Bethlehem innkeeper’s wife when she and her husband discover that they have accommodated the Holy Family in their lesser quarters. It is she who realizes that something momentous has happened back there. In grasping that fact, she seems also to embrace and grasp the larger truth of which Mary sings in the *Magnificat*, of the relative pettiness of our strivings and of the transformations this birth will bring. The innkeeper’s wife says:

God pity us indeed, for we are human,  
and do not always see the vision when it comes.  
Or, if we see it, do not follow it,  
Because it is too hard, too strange, too new,  
Too unbelievable, too difficult,  
Warring too much with common, easy ways.  
And now I know this, standing in this light,  
Who have been half alive these many years,  
Brooding on my own sorrow, my own pain.  
Life is not lost by dying! Life is lost  
Minute by minute, day by dragging day,  
In all the thousand, small, uncaring ways.  
Life can be *lost without vision*, but not lost by death,  
Lost by not caring, willing, going on  
Beyond the ragged edge of fortitude  
To something more - something no (one) has seen.

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<sup>5</sup> Kay, op. cit.

You who love money, you who love yourself,  
You who love bitterness, and I, who loved  
And lost and thought I could not love again,  
And all the people of this little town,  
Rise up! The loves we had were not enough.  
Something is loosed to change the shaken world,  
And with it we must change.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Vincent Benét, *A Child Is Born*, radio script, 1942. Italics mine.