

Our Gifts. Our Stories: Lifting The Lowly

Luke 1:39-55

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December 10, 2023

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.” These are the opening words of what we know as Mary’s “Magnificat”, a passage of scripture which has been set to music by scores of composers over hundreds of years including Bach, Mozart, Pachelbel, and, as we’ll hear downtown, Vivaldi. The “Magnificat”, or the Song of Mary, is one of the most beloved passages of scripture, yet we rarely talk about its meaning or why Luke includes it in the opening chapter of his gospel. What can we learn about Luke as a storyteller from his, the most well-known and detailed narrative of Christ’s birth?

This is the second sermon in our series entitled “Our Stories, Our Gifts” which focuses on how each of the four gospel writers approach Advent and the Christmas story. Last week, we looked at Mark, who chose not to write any birth narrative at all. For Mark, there was no time for elaborate storytelling about the first coming of Christ because the second coming might happen any day. Mark wants to tell the story of Jesus’s ministry, his suffering, and his death as quickly as possible and lead people to acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah.

Luke’s approach is entirely different. His writing is more descriptive and elegant. He begins his gospel with a formal preface, characteristic of the academic writing of his day. “Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I, too, decided, as one having a grasp of everything from the start, to write a well-ordered account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may have a firm grasp of the words in which you have been instructed.”

No one knows definitively who Theophilus was but clues in the text indicate he was a wealthy, high-ranking Gentile possibly living in Rome or Antioch. It is likely he had recently joined the Jesus movement. In fact, some scholars believe the name refers to not just one person but a whole community. Luke wants to make sure these new believers have as much accurate information about Jesus and his teachings as possible and, therefore, writes this gospel to share with them. Tradition tells us Luke was a doctor who traveled with Paul, and while there is no way to verify that, it is clear from his writing that he is well-educated, and he understands how to use language to shape his gospel around his own theological priorities. Luke is not only the author of this, the longest gospel, but also of the Book of Acts.

In their book, “The First Christmas”, theologians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan describe the first two chapters of Luke as a kind of overture to the rest of the gospel. While Luke’s primary interest is to present Jesus as the Messiah and the bearer of God’s kingdom into the world, in these first two chapters, we also hear the other major themes which Luke weaves through the rest of his writing. After the preface, he begins his story with two parallel annunciations - the visits of the angel Gabriel to first Elizabeth and Zechariah and then to young Mary to announce the coming of a child. Elizabeth and Zechariah, an elderly couple who long

before had given up hope of having children, will be the parents of John the Baptist while Mary will give birth to the Son of God and name him Emmanuel, God with us.

For Luke, as with the other gospel writers, it is important to connect the Jesus story to the stories of God's people thus far. John the Baptist is the link between the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and the coming of the promised Messiah. Even while still in the womb, we know he recognizes Jesus as the Messiah when he stirs in Elizabeth's belly.

Then, Mary bursts forth with the Magnificat which reveals how Luke will frame his gospel. Sharon Ringe, Professor Emerita of New Testament at Wesley Theological Seminary writes, "Luke's Gospel invites his hearers or readers to meet Jesus in arenas of human concern, pain, joy, and hope. Luke is welcomed by many theologians of liberation as the Gospel that paints most vividly the implications of the message and ministry of Jesus for the marginalized people of society. Luke contains a number of stories that contrast people who are rich and powerful with others who are poor or otherwise outside the mainstream of society's benefits - those who are maimed, lame, blind, deaf, or ill".

This is why Luke's gospel is sometimes known as the social justice gospel and he introduces this theme with the words of the Magnificat. Ringe goes on to write that when Mary says, "he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant", the meaning of the word translated "lowly" here is not "humble" or "meek" as we tend to assume but rather "humiliated" or "marginalized". This young girl, marginalized as a Jew in the Roman Empire and humiliated as an unmarried, pregnant woman then sings of God's mercy and all the good things God has done for her.

Above all, the Magnificat is a song of hope. She sings, "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." Mary sets forth a vision of what Jesus will do in his life and ministry. Her song gives voice to all those whose "dreams and yearnings" are lost to systems of power and dominance.

From this point on, Luke tells us the stories of how Jesus cared for the poor, healed the sick, raised the eyes of a woman long bent over in shame, and, perhaps most importantly, opened the kingdom of God not just to the Jews but to all the nations.

In a couple of weeks, we will hear the rest of Luke's overture, chapter 2, which tells of Mary and Joseph journeying to Bethlehem and Jesus's birth in a stable. We will sing our own songs about the coming of the Christ child and celebrate God's incredible gift of becoming one of us.

Yet, as we prepare for that special night, we do so knowing that a heartbreaking, horrific war is playing out in the very land of Jesus's birth. Luke's gospel serves to remind us that the hope and peace, joy and love of Christmas are not for just a chosen few, but for everyone. That God came to live among us to turn our social values upside down, to create a level playing field where all God's children are valued and loved, where no one holds power over another.

May it be so. Amen.