

Advent 4, 2015
"The Magnificat"
Rev. Deacon Eric Johnson

The Magnificat

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; *
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed: *
the Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name.
He has mercy on those who fear him *
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm, *
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, *
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things, *
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel, *
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
The promise he made to our fathers, *
to Abraham and his children for ever.*

- ✘ The event took place a long time ago. Think about your parents and then go back another 79 or 80 generations
 - ✓ This is the story about a meeting between Mary the Mother of Jesus and Luke, the writer of the 3rd Gospel and Acts
 - ✓ This took place so long ago, that no one is really sure where it happened.
 - It could have been in Jerusalem, where Mary was living with John the son of Zebedee
 - ◆ Or it could have taken place in Ephesus (the big seaport city on the western coast of Asia Minor), where Mary might have gone after the diaspora from Jerusalem.
- ✘ Luke, the doctor and scientist, wanted to use what is now called primary sources for his history of Jesus and the early church, and Mary was certainly one of those primary sources.
 - ✓ Mary for her part, had a few things to say to Luke, to correct the record.
 - After all, she thought, the first two writers about Jesus got part of the story right, but there was a lot they missed
 - And now that she was 70 years old, Mary was of the age when could say what she wanted, and she had a lot to say to Luke to make sure that he, at least, would get the record straight
- ✘ My goodness, she thought, Mark only mentioned her in passing, and Matthew made her husband, Joseph, the center of whole story about the birth of Jesus.

- ✓ In Matthew...well that was particularly galling: it was all about angels talking to Joseph and the genealogy of Joseph.
 - This was true enough in its way, but an angel of God talked to her as well, and it was her, Mary, more than anyone else, who was there at the beginning, and she was going to make sure that this Doctor Luke fellow got it right.
- ✗ But then she thought, “who am I to convince this Luke, this physician, that I have any authority to speak about the Good News?”
- ✗ If I had any authority, I wouldn’t be a two-time refugee.
 - ✓ A refugee the first time in the land of Egypt, thanks to that bloody tyrant, King Herod and his worries about boys born in Bethlehem
 - ✓ And a refugee the second time in Ephesus, thanks to the high priest, Ananus, who threw my son James off the temple parapet and then commanded the crowd to stone his broken body to death¹.
 - ✓ Not to mention being an outcast in Bethlehem, when my first-born was born in a stable.
- ✗ And, perhaps, Luke, high-powered doctor that he is, will think that a poor person cannot speak with authority on anything.
 - ✓ Joseph was a good enough provider, but we could only afford to offer a pair of turtledoves in the temple on the 33rd day after the birth of Jesus.
 - ✓ And thank goodness that Joseph could do some carpentry work after he lost the farm to Herod’s taxes...although (come to think of it) Jesus did learn some valuable lessons on the farm that he worked into his parables: farmer scattering seed, and threshing and gathering sheaves into barns, and all.
- ✗ Maybe, Mary thought, I could tell Luke about the poem I composed when I visited my cousin Elizabeth
 - ✓ “My soul magnifies the Lord,” I said. “My spirit rejoices in God my savior.”
- ✗ I repeated that poem again and again to my son,
 - ✓ And I believe it became a part of his life; it became his message; it became the Good News
- ✗ My son, Jesus, understood what I meant when I said that God “remembered his promise of mercy, the promise he made to our fathers.”
 - ✓ Jesus knew that I was talking about, and he called this “the Kingdom of God”
 - A Kingdom as a nation governed by Jewish law and ruled by a true Davidic King, rather than a Roman emperor or a tyrant like Herod
 - A kingdom where we “remembered God’s promise of mercy; the promise he made to our fathers.”

¹ See Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*

- ✓ A kingdom that would return to authentic Judaism of Amos and Micah and Hosea and Jeremiah
 - Jeremiah, who said, “If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another; if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan and the widow or shed innocent blood...” then God would dwell with you ...in this land.” (Jer 7:7)
- ✓ A kingdom to which all the prophets looked forward: “Do not think that sacrifices will make yourself right with God, but instead focus on the true pillars of the Torah: compassion, social justice, faith in God.”
 - Jesus understood that we needed to ground ourselves in these teachings of the Torah, and that’s why he always said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law of the prophets...I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill.” (Mt. 5)
- ✗ And Jesus, Mary thought, was one who of the few who understood what I meant when I said that God would “scatter the proud in their conceit” and “cast down the mighty from their thrones.”
 - ✓ He understood that this would not come as the result of a violent military overthrow or by some great end-of-the-world disaster
 - ✓ Instead God would lift up the lowly
 - This would be a grassroots movement
 - That’s why Jesus said: “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed [like the clash of armies and cataclysmic conflagrations]...For, in fact, the Kingdom of God is among you.” (Lk 17: 20-21)
- ✗ Mary also thought about the many times that she repeated to Jesus that God will “fill the hungry with good things, and the rich he will send away empty.”
 - ✓ Jesus also understood that in a world that prizes power, wealth, and status, God’s favor will be found among the powerless (the meek);
 - This was the teaching of Jesus:
 - The poor will have the kingdom of God
 - The hungry will be filled with food
 - those who weep will laugh
- ✗ Yet Jesus understood what I meant when I said, “the rich he has sent away empty.”
 - ✓ Jesus knew that those who have it all now will not find their reward in the Kingdom of God... “Woe to them,” he said:
 - “But woe to you who are rich,” he said, “for you have received your consolation.”
 - Woe to you who are filled now, for you will be hungry.
 - Woe to you who laugh now, for you will grieve and weep.
 - Woe to you when all speak well of you, for their ancestors treated the false prophets in this way.” (Lk 6:24-26)

- ✘ Jesus also understood that the Kingdom of Heaven was not a movement that would pitch one against the other: rich against poor
 - ✓ Instead the Kingdom of Heaven, “the promise God made to our fathers,” would bridge the gap between landowner and tenant, between toll collector and fisherman, between tax collector and farmer, between the wealthy and the poor.
 - ✓ This is the reason that Jesus reached out the elites of the land and why he dined at the homes of tax collectors, and with the religious authorities and the well to do
 - They were the ones responsible for the growing gap between rich and poor, and they were in a position to change those conditions.
- ✘ Closing the gap would be “the promise of mercy;’ this would be the new social covenant
 - ✓ All peoples, rich and poor, would turn towards one another, would have solidarity with each other in community and solidarity in love and in faith and in God
- ✘ And, Mary thought, my proudest moment as a mother came when I heard Jesus improve upon the Magnificat and turn my poem into a prayer that we all say every day;
 - ✓ He turned my poem and our shared understanding of the Kingdom of God into something more than a poem or a prophesy. His prayer is a social contract between God and each of us in community:
 - ✓ It’s a prayer addressed to Our Father, the holder of the contract.
 - ✓ And I like the prayer in it’s original Aramaic, rather than the Greek:

Our Father; hallowed be your name. your kingdom come.
 Tomorrow’s bread give us today.
 And forgive us our debts and sins, as we forgive our debtors.
 And do not lead us to the test.²
- ✘ Now that is a prayer of community
 - ✓ To *our* Father, not *my* God:
 - ✓ “Your kingdom come here on earth (Not “please transport us to the next world where all will be better”)
 - ✓ Give us tomorrow’s bread today (“Give *us*,” not “Give *me*” my daily bread and forget about my neighbor)
 - ✓ And its about mutual forgiveness: our sins and those of our neighbor
- ✘ This is the prayer I say every day with my community of believers here in Ephesus
 - ✓ And my son asked us to pray this, not in the expectation that we will sit on our laurels and let God do all this on his own
 - ✓ But Jesus asked us to say this prayer and repeat this contract

² See Fr. John Paul Meier

- in the hope that we can be the agents who can bring a measure of holiness into the world
- ✘ My son, Jesus, asks us to pray that God will give us the courage to turn that prayer into action
 - ✓ And use our talents to work with dedication to repair the world
 - ✓ My son, Jesus, asks us to pray this so that our actions can become a beacon of light and love and hope in a world that lives in fear and darkness
 - ✓ My son, Jesus, believed that our prayerful actions can bring peace into a world that lives in hatred and violence
 - So that our prayers can serve as a reminder to us to work with dedication to repair the world
 - and help bring about the kingdom in which we can welcome God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit to dwell among us.