

WPC  
Rev. Ken Sunoo  
December 20, 2009 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

Magnificat  
Luke 1:46-56

Have you ever noticed that men are strangely quiet in Luke's first chapter? Zechariah the priest is struck silent by the angel Gabriel because he doesn't believe the angel's message that his wife Elizabeth is pregnant. Joseph says nothing at all. Our gaze is drawn toward two females: Mary and her cousin Elizabeth. They realize that God has decided to work through the lowly and the weak to transform the world.

That's what Mary sings about in today's passage. Mary's song of praise is called The Magnificat, which is the first word of her song in the Latin Vulgate translation. She sings about a new world order, where God will lift the lowly and scatter the proud.

What's interesting about The Magnificat is the verb tense that's used. The verb tense makes all the difference in the world. I was at the Episcopal bookstore this past week picking up a book I had ordered. I've been there quite a bit this fall, collecting books that I need to write my Doctor of Ministry dissertation. The owner of the bookstore asked me if all the work I've been doing is worth it, and I answered, "Well, it will have been worth

it.” It often doesn’t feel like it’s worth all the work and headaches writing my dissertation, but I know once I finish, it will have been worth it.

Notice, in The Magnificat, Mary does not sing that God *will* act; she insists that God *has* acted. As Joanna Adams says: “The Mighty One has done great things for me,” Mary sings, but her baby hasn't even been born yet. God has filled the hungry already, she implies, but millions of stomachs are still empty. Either she has lost her mind, or she has been blessed with double vision. She believes that heaven and earth are on an unavoidable convergence course. With eyes of faith and a hopeful ear, she is able to discern that the future God has planned is bleeding back into the here and now. (Joanna Adams, “Double Vision,” Christian Century, 2006).

That’s really good news. Mary was so sure of God’s grace and love, she was so convinced of the great things that her yet to be born son was going to do, that she could confidently use the past tense in her song of praise. It hasn’t happened yet, but we can be confident that God holds the future in his hands.

That’s why Christians can continue to hold on to hope in the midst of evil and tragedy. Make no mistake: there are truly tragic things that happen in our world. There’s war and terrorism, poverty and oppression, illness and death. Police officers get brutally killed, teenagers are robbed of their lives

by drunk drivers, and cancer claims both young and old alike as victims. In the last couple of years, many have lost their jobs and their homes. There's bad news all around us.

But the good news of Christmas is that the bad news we hear and see is not the final word, and God has not left us alone. He is Emmanuel, God with us.

Anne Lamott tells the story of a time when she took her then two-year-old son to Lake Tahoe, where they stayed in a condominium by the lake. That area around Reno is such a hotbed of gambling that all the rooms are equipped with those curtains and shades that block out every speck of light so you can stay up all night in the casinos and then sleep all morning. One afternoon she put the baby to bed in his playpen in one of those rooms, in the pitch dark, and went to do some work. A few minutes later she heard her baby knocking on the door from inside the room. She got up, knowing he'd crawled out of his playpen. She went to put him down again, but when she got to the door, she found he'd locked it.

He had somehow managed to push the little button on the doorknob. He was calling to her, "Mommy, Mommy," and Anne was saying to him, "Jiggle the door knob, darling." Of course he couldn't even see the knob to know what she was talking about. After a moment, it became clear to him

that his mother could not open the door, and panic set in. He began sobbing. So his mother ran around like crazy trying everything, trying to get the door to work, calling the rental agency where she left a message, calling the manager where she left another message, and running back to check her son every minute or so. And there, in this dark, locked room was her terrified little child.

Finally she did the only thing she could, which was to slide her fingers underneath the door, where there were a few centimeters of space. She kept telling him over and over to bend down and find her fingers. And somehow he did.

So they stayed like that for a really long time, connected, on the floor, him holding her fingers in the dark, and slowly feeling connected, feeling her love, feeling her presence and her care.<sup>1</sup>

Waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises to set the world right often feels like being a two-year-old in the dark. God is our mother, and we are not old enough to figure everything out on our own, especially when we're feeling panicky. She could break down the door if that struck her as being the best way, but instead, "via my prayers and my church and my

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).

awkward faith, I can reach just far enough to hold onto her fingers underneath the door. How can that be enough? It is enough.”<sup>2</sup>

The people of God who had been waiting for years on end had been expecting a Messiah who would be a king like David, who would knock down the door of injustice and oppression. Instead, they got a Savior who suffered and died and rose again, in the process defeating evil by conquering its greatest weapon, death. We just need eyes to see God’s victory in the midst of our fallen world.

“We will be blessed if we can see, as Mary saw, the possibility of transformation for our often unjust and loveless world. We will be blessed if we can move, as Mary did, from seeing to doing, joyfully joining in God's ongoing shakeup of things as they are.” (Joanna Adams)

Now we’re ready for Christmas. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Ramsey, “Belonging,” *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2009, p. 23.

12/20/09 WPC Announcements:

Welcome, Visitors, Prayer cards, Coffee Hour.

***VISITOR / PRAYER CARDS IN THE PEWS:***

- Invite any guests with us this morning to take just a moment to fill out a visitor card, and then simply drop it in the offering plate when it is passed around later in the service this morning. Another function for these same pew cards – anyone, guest or member, who has a prayer request that they may not feel comfortable saying out loud during our prayer time, but for which they'd like the congregation to pray, may jot down your request on the other side of one of these same cards, again just drop it in the offering plate, and we'll be sure we include your particular request during prayers of people this morning. May, if you prefer, simply indicate that the request is to be shared with pastors only.
- Draw your attention to announcements and activities listed in bulletin
- Christmas Joy offering will be collected this morning
- Dec. 20 Christmas Carol jamboree – thanks to all who participated and led.
- Dec. 24 Candlelight Service of Lessons and Carols at 7:00 pm.
- Jan. 17 Guys Night Out
- Other announcements this morning?
- Our worship leader this morning is Michael Friedline. Our Advent wreath will be lit by Kurt Swihart.

Prayers of the People 12/20/2009

Invited to respond to each of the petitions w/words “Lord, hear our prayer” – both those I raise and those I’ll invite from the congregation in just a few moments.

Lord Jesus, in your incarnation you took on flesh, our flesh. Give us that grace whereby we might live our lives each day convinced of your indwelling with us, assured that you love our world enough to enter into it and to share this life with us, that you love us enough even to die for us so that we might live for you... [ **God, in your mercy**, hear our prayer]

Gracious and loving God, as you have transformed us, teach us to be transforming. As we faithfully envision the future delivered to us through the incarnate presence of your Son in our midst, help us to hear your call to renew our focus on that future. So refocused, encourage us and strengthen us that we might live your future in the midst of our present.... [ **God, in your mercy**, hear our prayer]

We pray for those in need... Lord, because you stooped to us and reached out to us, we are able to boldly pray for the needs of those in this congregation, and those in the whole world. We lift up before you especially the needs of those who suffer from the cruelty of unjust governments, those who must live amid wars and rumors of wars, who suffer from the effects of civil unrest and social turmoil... [ **God, in your mercy**, hear our prayer]

Lord - hear us now as we approach you with our petitions and concerns, the prayers of our hearts... [ **God, in your mercy**, hear our prayer]

...and for those things for which we are thankful this day.

[**Gracious God**, we thank you]...

Lord, we lift all our prayers, both spoken and unspoken, in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying ‘Our Father...’

Joanna Adams: OF ALL THE PEOPLE I worry about this time of year, from harried sales clerks to ho-ho-ho weary Santa Clauses, none have my sympathy more than the people who deliver the Christmas catalogues. How their backs must ache, how their jaws must clench as day after day they open our mail boxes and stuff them with L. L. Bean and J. Crew catalogues, not to mention pet supply, natural fiber and computer parts catalogues. May the mail carriers' Christmases be bright, and may their January mail bags be light!

What is it with catalogues by the pound? The contents fall into three categories: things we neither need nor want, things we want but do not need, and things we might need, whether we know it or not. A recent case in point is a gadget my husband couldn't resist. It is a combination lighting and magnifying device, no thicker than a credit card. You keep it in your wallet, and when the waiter brings you the check in some romantic, candlelit restaurant, you take the device, aim it at your bill and, Voila!--all becomes clear. The light illuminates the numbers while the magnifying glass makes them larger. What more could you ask for?

The glad song Mary sings to her cousin Elizabeth in Luke's Gospel functions in a similar way. It illumines, making possible the discernment of something that was there all the time, but difficult to see without aid. Mary sings of the whole new order of things that God is creating all around us, one in which the hungry are filled with good things and the rich, who have unwisely filled up on so much that does not satisfy, are emptied so that they can have their real hungers met at last.

As Mary sings, can you see the lowly being lifted, and the proud being scattered and set free from the vanity that is in their hearts? Can you see the promises of God made through the prophets being fulfilled by means of the child Mary will bear? When he is born, she will name him Jesus, which means "God has saved." In our shadowed world, the song makes brightly visible what someone has called "the great process of transformation being wrought by the creative energy of the triune God."

I admit that I am having trouble with my verb tenses here. "The Mighty One has done great things for me," Mary sings, but her baby hasn't even been born yet. God has filled the hungry already, she implies, but millions of stomachs are still empty. Either she has lost her mind, or she has

been blessed with double vision. She believes that heaven and earth are on an unavoidable convergence course. With eyes of faith and a hopeful ear, she is able to discern that the future God has planned is bleeding back into the here and now.

Throughout the ages, artists have tended to give Mary ruby lips, batting eyelashes and a demure manner. Those artists must have closed their Bibles before they got to the song Mary sings, "The Magnificat," named after the first word in the Vulgate translation. What wonderful nomenclature. The Lord is magnified as Mary offers her exuberant praise; Mary is magnified by her act of adoration. The power and grace of God actively at work in the world are magnified. We are magnified. The tiny shoots of salvation springing up all around us are magnified. Signs of the great reversal are everywhere. The Mighty One is in charge, and "holy is his name."

Looking through the lens of Mary's hope, we see things that on our own we would not have dared to dream of.

Luke did not write his account of the events of Jesus' birth in a vacuum. He looked back at everything through the viewing device of the cross. On a trip to the island of Patmos, I visited a small Greek Orthodox church and looked up at a ceiling covered with ancient frescoes. One of them depicted Mary sitting by her baby's cradle. I am afraid it would not qualify for the front of a Christmas card. The cradle was shaped in the form of a sarcophagus, or burial casket, and the swaddling clothes were a funeral shroud.

What God did at Jesus' birth was no different in meaning and method from what God was doing at Jesus' death. God is able to create new possibilities out of what appear to be impossibilities. The forces of death and hopelessness are vanquished. How does God do it? By the power of vulnerable love.

One chilly Saturday, I stood in a circle on the front lawn of a young mother and dad's new house in a low-income neighborhood. We had helped paint the house a welcoming blue and trimmed it with white. We had spread straw on the ground to cover the mud and to keep newly sown grass seed from washing away. "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," we sang

lustily. We thanked God for giving us the privilege of holding caulking guns, hammers and paintbrushes and being able to do our little part in setting the world right again, at least for one family in our community.

Someone once asked southern humorist Roy Blount if he believed in infant baptism. He replied, "Believe in it! Shoot, I have even seen it!" We will be blessed if we can see, as Mary saw, the possibility of transformation for our often unjust and loveless world. We will be blessed if we can move, as Mary did, from seeing to doing, joyfully joining in God's ongoing shakeup of things as they are.

Tony Robinson: And so the lessons for Advent IV, Sunday, December 20, are already upon us. John the Baptist is behind us (to the relief of many I am sure), and we join Mary and Elizabeth in joyful anticipation. My grandmother used to speak of "having the anticipates," meaning she was keenly excited, looking forward, to some anticipated event. This time of year the anticipates seem half or more than half the joy.

Micah 5: 2 - 5a

In some measure anticipation rests on previous experience, memory driving and deepening hope. So it is here as Micah's hope rests on the long story of David and God's promise to the tiny ancestral village of the shepherd-king. There's a bit of a polemic at work here. Judgment comes to proud Jerusalem (5: 1) center of power and privilege. Grace comes to the least, to "tiny Bethlehem." From Bethlehem shall come forth the promised one, one who shall stand and "feed his flock in strength of the Lord." Just so history and memory shape future hope. The new shall be new and yet continuous with God's previous work and grace. As surprising and as familiar as a newborn child.

Hebrews 10: 5 - 10

And yet here (in Hebrews), the future hope is juxtaposed to and in some measure also a critique of the past. Past is the cult of sacrifice. Future is the once and for all work of Christ, a priest forever. I'm not sure this is, or should be made into, super-sessionism, or cast as Christianity versus Judaism. It is more a religion of grace versus a religion of works. The old order (still much alive) required relentless sacrifices to "win" the favor of God, to propitiate an angry deity. The new order is one where in Christ, God

comes to us and is for us, taking our side and our life in the flesh, promising never to leave us. Thus, we can stop our efforts to "win" God's favor and live trusting God's grace and love.

Luke 1: 39 - 55

Here are two women who are living joyfully, trusting God's grace and love, and the power of this God to do a new and amazing thing. So many strands of the previous readings are caught up in this one. Tiny Bethlehem becomes Mary, maid of low estate. The mighty are cast down and the lowly raised up by the God of great reversals. And in Hebrews, the incarnation, "the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all," is carried in Mary's womb, fully incarnational, no separate spiritual realm. One imagines being in the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, where the women sang in joy and no other sound/ voice was heard for Zechariah had been struck dumb (see chapter one) for doubting Gabriel. Some sort of early feminist thing going on here! The word "leaping" appears a couple times as babies leap in wombs. This is surely the sign of a powerful Other, of grace, at work, intruding. There is another power at work, something the pregnant woman knows, something the expectant family knows. So now on the edge of

Christmas we are all invited to be that expectant family, confident that there is another power at work in the world, bringing new hope, life and possibility to us and for us.