

Luke 1:39-56

39 In those days Mary arose and traveled with haste to the hill country, to a town of Judah¹, 40 and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped for joy in her womb², and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, 42 cried out with a loud voice saying, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 Look! For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy.³ 45 And

¹The pace set by Luke at this stage in the narrative is more hurried than before. Following her encounter with Gabriel, Mary travels to a city of Judah. We understand the hurried pace because of the use of the word haste. What is missing is any reason for her travels. Gabriel mentioned that Elizabeth was pregnant but he did tell Mary that she needed to see Elizabeth. In reality, "as a young girl, Mary would not have left her home without accompaniment—either to browse in her hometown or (especially!) to travel some seventy miles to the hill country around Jerusalem. Until she entered the bridal chamber, a girl lived in seclusion in her home (Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1997), 94-95)." There is a lack of attention to this particular detail of Judean custom in order that the haste with which Mary travels to see Elizabeth is uplifted. Despite the cultural difficulties, this passage serves a greater theological purpose by intersecting the story of John with the story of Jesus.

² Earlier in Luke, we are told that "even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit (1.15)." John's task as given by Gabriel is to go before the Lord, to "make ready a people prepared for the Lord (1.17)." Now as Mary approaches Elizabeth, the unborn John begins his work of preparation by leaping with joy. From Elizabeth's womb, filled with the Holy Spirit, John recognizes the coming of the Lord in the womb of Mary. This expression of joy, centered in the womb, will become a dominant theme in the Gospel of Luke. Joy is the human response to God's free gift of grace and mercy. Joy accompanies John in the womb, joy is announced by the angels to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks; joy is response of the disciples following Jesus' resurrection and ascension. There is something about the good news of the gospel that causes a well-spring of joy within those who believe.

³ Like her son, Elizabeth is also filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, compelled and enabled to "discern the significance of her baby's movements in her womb and to give voice to her child's recognition of Mary and her unborn baby. Her speech is inspired speech, she speaks on God's behalf, and thus she agrees with Gabriel's earlier assessment of Mary's favored status (Green, 96)." Before she can say "hi" or even acknowledge Mary's presence with a typical greeting, Elizabeth blurts out "blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Her language is reminiscent of that used for two particular women with the religious tradition: Jael in Judges 5.24 ("Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed.") and Judith, found in the apocryphal book Judith, 13.18 ("O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God, who created the heavens and the earth, who has guided you to cut off the head of the leader of our enemies."). In both instances, these women are praised because they have

blessed is she who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."⁴ 46 And Mary said⁵, "My soul magnifies the Lord; 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.⁶ 48 For he has looked upon the humble state of his slave. Look! From now on all generations will call me blessed. 49 The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.⁷ 50

played a significant role in overthrowing Israel's enemies through acts of justified killing. By contrast, Mary is called blessed because of her role in salvation as the God-bearer; in her role as mother of the Lord God. More to the point she is called blessed because the fruit of her womb is both blessed and holy. In both instances, Elizabeth isn't conferring God's blessing upon Mary; rather she is confirming God's blessing upon Mary's life and the fruit of her womb—the one who is the lamb of God for the salvation of the world.

Following this, Elizabeth rightly asks why the mother of the Lord would come to her. In doing so, Elizabeth acknowledges the superiority of her younger relative because of her role. Her confusion over Mary's arrival indicates the particular social custom of that era when, "as a rule, the lesser greets the greater; the servant travels to the master. What is Elizabeth to make of this reversal of societal convention? First, the superiority of Jesus over John is thus again highlighted. Second, however, the nature and exercise of the superior status of Jesus is anticipated. With his coming, social conventions will be turned on their head; the greater will serve the lesser (Green, 96)." In this way, Mary becomes the ultimate example of an obedient disciple in that she was the "least of these" and yet she is exalted. Mary is the last who becomes first and yet still obediently serves those who don't share her status.

⁴ Again, Mary is called blessed, not for anything she did or accomplished on her own steam, but because she heard the word of grace spoken to her and responded to it in faithfulness.

⁵ Mary's response to Elizabeth's words, often referred to as a canticle called *The Magnificat*, brings the narrative before us to a complete stop. With haste, Mary went to see Elizabeth, now the pace of the narrative is stalled to emphasize the glorious good news that we are about to hear. Mary's song "is a reminder that Luke is not interested merely in *events* – past, present, and future – but especially in their *meaning*. The purpose of this narratological "time out," then, is hermeneutical – that is, to ensure that we understand the significance of the angel's annunciation to Mary, her conception, and the blessing pronounced by her relative. Not surprisingly, that meaning is rooted in the covenantal purpose of God (Green, 98)." Throughout her song, Mary will bear witness to the coming ministry of Jesus Christ by rooting it precisely in the ministry of God found in the Old Testament; a ministry founded upon promise and a purpose for salvation and redemption.

⁶ In the opening lines of her song, Mary rejoices in the things God is doing; to the point that she refers to God as Savior. She recognizes that the child in her woman is none other than the salvation of God and that even she is in need of salvation. Contrary to what many believe, Mary is not sinless. She is no more human than you or me. She is not saved because of the child she bears in her womb; rather she is saved because the child she bears is the savior of the world.

⁷ Once again, Mary refers to herself as a slave of the Lord. Yet this is not within the context of a brutal owner-slave relationship; rather, the servanthood of Mary serves as window to God's grace. Mary understands her lowly state. She is from a town of no real significance, from a family whose background is quite ordinary. Yet, her praise is rooted in the fact that God has looked upon her lowliness. Upon the lips of Mary we discover that her song embodies the lowliness of a people oppressed by her Roman rulers. "From such domination God has acted to deliver Israel. Mary's low estate, then, can and should be

His mercy is from generation to generation for those who fear him. 51 He has shown might with his arm; he has scattered the arrogant of mind and heart. 52 He has brought down the rulers from their thrones but 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, remembering his mercy 55 according to the promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."⁸ 56 And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

taken as representative of her people's. Nevertheless, Mary's 'lowliness' is not only metaphorical and representative. The term Luke uses belongs to the semantic domain of the 'poor' in Luke-Acts, a domain associated with low status honor (Green, 103)." What we discover is that in the blessing conferred upon Mary, the Mighty One is doing great things for the world.

⁸ The second half of Mary's song picks up on two key understandings we have concerning who the Lord our God is toward us. "The first is the portrait of God as the divine warrior who accomplishes deliverance, God is the 'Mighty One' who accomplishes 'great things,' who shows 'strength' and scatters the proud, bringing down the powerful from their thrones and sending the rich away empty...At the same time, God is the merciful God of the covenant. He looks with favor and lifts up the lowly, extends mercy 'to those who fear him,' fills the hungry, and helps Israel. He acts 'in remembrance of his mercy,' remembering his promise to Israel of old (Green, 102)." These two images of God, images of the warrior God and images of the merciful God, both represent who God is toward us through the revelation of scripture. They coalesce together to show how God dynamically deals with sin and those things that are against God while at the same time showing that God dynamically and actively shows forth mercy in fulfilling the promises he has made. The image of the divine warrior who battles sin and the image of a merciful God bears witness to the abundance of God's grace. These two themes will play out in the ministry of Jesus throughout the rest of Luke's Gospel.

Jesus will be concerned with the ravages of sin and confronting those who are in power. Jesus will continue to tell parables that upset the social institutions that are in the world. At the same time, Jesus will do justice and love mercy. He will be concerned for those who are cast off; prostitutes, tax collectors, sinners to emphasize that they too have a place in God's world and in God's purposes of salvation. "The opponents of Jesus, and therefore God's purpose, are portrayed as persons who grasp for social respect and positions of honor, who exclude the less fortunate and socially unacceptable from their circles of kinship, who enjoy the power that accompanies their privileged status. Over against such persons, Mary's Song places the 'lowly' and 'hungry.' Set in this co-text, these people are not simply the unfortunate, those for whom life in general has not been kind. The powerful and privileged oppose God and in doing so oppress other people. Similarly, God's powerful opposition to the proud, powerful, and rich is at the same time gracious activity on behalf of the lowly and the hungry (Green, 104-105)."

What we find in Mary's Song is not only a concern for future salvation but also present salvation in terms of God's work in the world here and now. The advent and incarnation of our Lord is as much about future salvation as it is present salvation. The words of praise that Mary uses throughout her song, "speak of God's redeeming work not (only) as future but as already having been fulfilled. Such is the confidence of faith. The overthrow of the powerful has not come about through the mounting of the weak in

rebellion but through the coming of God in the weakness of a child (R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke" *New Interpreters Bible*, vol. 9 (Abingdon; Nashville, 1995), 55)." God's mighty acts, as proclaimed by Mary, bear witness to the counter-intuitive way God deals in the world. God does not support the oppressive ruler, he overthrows him. And in doing so, God lifts up the lowly. In Mary's Song, the curtain has been pulled back to reveal the shape and character of salvation.

Redemption and salvation are more than our typical expectations; they are about this God who so loves us that he penetrates to the heart of sin and our separation from God. Who the Lord our God is toward us is not some static deity who lives far beyond the concerns of the world; rather the LORD is an active God who acts out of his own self-giving nature to embrace humanity in, through, and as Jesus Christ. "The Mighty One is contrasted with the lowly, for it is as the Mighty One that God can act on behalf of the lowly; the powerful are contrasted with the lowly, with the former group oppressing (whether through malicious intent or seemingly benign neglect) the latter; and the Mighty One takes the side of the lowly. This is not to obliterate the powerful so that the lowly can achieve positions of honor and privilege to which they previously had no access. Rather, God is at work in individual lives (like Mary) and in the social order as a whole in order to subvert the very structure of society that supports and perpetuates such distinctions (Green, 105)." In this way, we see the role Jesus will play in his ministry. As God incarnate he will bring about a regime change; one where the powers of sin and death will no longer hold sway, for their curse will be broken and destroyed while the Kingdom of God will call people to repent and know the glory of the fullness of God.