

HOLY LEAPING BABIES: Micah 5:2-5, Luke 1:39-55

Encore performance of a 1997 message at Center Presbyterian Church Midway, PA, original source unknown

And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord (vs. 46)

Forgive me the “Batman-style” title for today’s thoughts – too much ill-spent youthful time in front of the TV, I guess – but in thinking through these verses I could not escape the image of John the Baptist doing a jig inside his mother’s womb as he senses the Messiah’s approach. For indeed, that is what John had been especially created for, to announce the coming of the Messiah and being filled with the Holy Spirit even then, he figured why wait to be born, he might as well get on with his announcing task; since he could not yet speak, dancing would have to do – now that is what I call enthusiasm for the job.

Indeed, all of today’s message is filled with singing and dancing: John dances, Elizabeth shouts, Mary sings and then finally, Jesus sings about the dance which He came to do. I guess all this singing and dancing at Christmas is appropriate – there must be something in such physical expressions of joy that brings us closer to God’s heart.

Sometimes I am tempted to ask: Does God really care about what happens in His world? Is God concerned about what happens to you and me down here? Well, Mary answers that question for us. Mary was a person for whom the reality of God burned brightly, someone with the absolute conviction, that God cared both about this world and that God cared deeply about what happened to her: Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Also, today on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, we hear the words of Micah, the prophet, who says,

*O Bethlehem ... from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.
And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God... (Mic 5:2-4).*

That was the prophecy that Mary’s pregnancy with Jesus, was finally going to bring to pass! Speaking to the angel, Mary sounds so brave “**Here I am the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word**” (vs. 38). Was Mary even aware at that time of the hardship of the shame, the gossip that would come with this special birth? Well let those things come in their time, but these days at least were for dancing with joy for the future – which the unborn John was soon to remind both women of.

Having heard the decree of Gabrielle, what was Mary to do now? Probably Mary had heard about Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy and her husband Zechariah’s written assertions that this was a sign from God. So Mary travels several days’ journey to a

little village in the hill country of Judea to visit her cousin, who was now 6-months pregnant. Gazing upon the Crèche scene, we get little sense of the predicament that God's "blessing" had placed Mary in. Hopefully, Elizabeth could help Mary sort out her own part in this promise and its difficult circumstances. Which Elizabeth DOES WITH JOY! Like her son, who is already heralding the Messiah, the mother of John welcomes the mother of Jesus with a shout of praise.

Can you visualize the scene? Pregnant Elizabeth, older, well established, a city woman and the wife of a priest, rising to greet her younger country cousin saying, "***blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me?***"

Mary, after embracing her cousin, also filled with the Holy Spirit, says, "***My Soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.***"

The village where Elizabeth lived still stands high on a hillside just outside of Jerusalem. It is called En Karim today. It looks more a Christmas scene than any other place in Israel; heavily wooded with evergreen trees, as the wind murmurs through their branches, the air is filled with the fragrance of pine.

As I try to visualize the meeting there between Mary and Elizabeth, I hope that the village of that day was just as beautiful, quiet and fragrant. And I hope that the setting reinforced Mary's joy. We who know the rest of the story know that '**joy**' was at best going to be a transient condition in Joseph and Mary's life.

Mary's words, "*My Soul magnifies the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*" must have overflowed from a marvelous vision of God deep within her, that transformed her fears to warmth, comfort and peace that came straight from the heart of God – which hopefully somehow prepared her for the days to come.

Although we have been schooled by years of Christmas pageants and countless singings of "gentle Mary laid her child," **to think of Mary as soft and mild**, the biblical picture is quite different. Mary's song, known as the *Magnificat*, after the first word of her speech in Jerome's Latin translation, offers little succor to the comfortable and powerful. Mary is as demur as dynamite, as mild as three-alarm chili!

It is at her cousin, Elizabeth's home that Mary sings this song. Normally, nothing could be more commonplace than a conversation between two pregnant women, two first-time mothers. And yet this conversation is anything but ordinary baby talk. First there was Elizabeth, the aged wife of a priest whose son, a prophet from birth, would head off into the wilderness to live the life of an itinerant holy man calling for all to repent.

Did Elizabeth have any idea of the untimely death her own son would face?
Did Mary have any idea of the heartbreak that was in store for her?

But both women knew and trusted in God's care – and thus both could sing in spite of their son's tragic futures.

We dare not lose sight of Mary's situation either, she was probably 14 or 15, the normal age of marriage in those days, engaged but still a virgin, not yet married to Joseph. Consider the chances of her story being believed, that she had been visited by an angel who announced to her she would have a child of the Holy Spirit, who would be the Savior of the world. Let any pregnant girl try that one on her parents. Surely the neighbors would say that Joseph had taken advantage of her. Or, if he were not the father, Joseph should have been furious and had every right to break off the engagement.

No matter how she tried to color it, Mary was a young woman just emerging from adolescence who was in a bad situation. No wonder Mary, before showing signs of being with child, rushed off to be with her cousin Elizabeth, the one person who would believe her extraordinary story of divine intervention.

The therapy worked, for Elizabeth confirmed immediately Mary's special status as mother to be of the Lord by singing:

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb . . . And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord"

Mary's "Magnificat," demonstrates the wisdom of God's choice. Notice that Mary turns Elizabeth's accolades around -- it matters not what *she* has done. *My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.* What matters is what God has done and whether God gets the praise.

Mary stayed three months with Elizabeth, just long enough to help with John's birth and then she returned home to face her own music. And to make some; in the book of Hebrews Jesus sings: "*Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me ...See, I have come to do your will, O God*". . . **to abolish the first order to establish the second** (10:5-9).

Selecting a poor teenager with no status or economic power, God was announcing a shake-up in the way things ordinarily happen in this world – as Jesus said to abolish the first order in order to establish the second. As author Tom Carlisle wrote:

It is only Mary, just Mary the insignificant, the unknown who is known of God. Her low estate rocks kingdoms then and now. (*Beginning with Mary*, p.7.)

The God who called her, the God who is the father of Jesus, is the one who turns the world topsy-turvy, upside down: He has *scattered the proud in the thoughts 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" (vss. 51-53). So, this is no gentle Mary who sings here, but a Mary whose word proclaims God's breaking into life, in ways that shatter old assumptions and undermine conventional authority.

There is something nettlesome about those people who understand God this way; something that makes them a threat to those who would usurp the prerogatives of God; not only the Hitlers and Husseins of the world, but also to those politicians or business leaders who think that in quotas, politics, or "a booming economy" will be the salvation of the world.

Mary's song reminds us that God's people refuse to say what always shall be, or that the way the world is structured, is the way God wants it. They keep relating to a power that goes beyond human power. They do not just ask whether a thing can be done. They ask, "Is it right? Is it in God's plan?"

We miss the thrust of the text if we reduce Mary's "Magnificat" to a guilt-producing demand to consider the "**lowly**" the "**hungry**." We must do that of course. There is something essential – especially at Christmas – about, in God's name, looking to serve the last, the least, the lost. But the Magnificat goes beyond guilt to offer a hope beyond the now. We would be considered hopelessly naïve, if we believed Mary's song represented present reality.

- We do not necessarily see the **powerful being brought down from their thrones** ...although, yes, we have seen a succession of empire makers come and go: both national, congregational, and collegiate.
- Or **the rich being sent empty away** ... although, yes, occasionally even the Donald Trumps and Michael Vicks have had to file for bankruptcy.

Mary's song thus does not describe the world as it is most of the time. It is instead a song of hope, of promise, of a future re-creation of the world.

The world continues to try to live in its self-imposed darkness, but God keeps breaking through in faraway places like Bethlehem, Ethiopia, Korea and even in the most restrictive of places like China, Iraq and Cuba (all three of which are having quite a revival in spite of their Governments' attempts to keep God out).

But nevertheless, the kingdom while living in individuals, is still not yet fully here, like the candles of Christmas eve, we are merely points of light – made more beautiful and brilliant – by shining in an otherwise dark atmosphere. The world lives in darkness, its songs are dreary. The Prince of Darkness says "adjust, adapt, get along, accept this as reality." But the Magnificat urges on us a restlessness with the world 'as it is,' because it sings of the ultimate triumph of God.

We experience that sense of longing for something more in a variety of ways. But sometimes that longing sparks in us faith's gift of imagination, which creates a new world for us, a world that turns our values upside down. Perhaps this Christmas will bring something more than just another celebration for you. Advent will become adventure. Mary's son will create in your imaginations a vision of a turned-upside-down world where God's values will reign and the promise will pull us out of the ordinary into God's extraordinary reordering of life.

And finally we come to Jesus himself. While John may have danced in his mother's womb, Jesus has been dancing since the foundation of the world. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dancing to a theme of creation, salvation, redemption and restoration.

Now on earth and found in human form, Jesus looks up to heaven and sings:

"Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired – but a body you have prepared for me! In burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure – but see I am come to do your will O God"

In Christmas, the seed of Easter has been planted "the boy-child Jesus had come for to die – for poor ornery people like you and like I." But like his mother Mary, his aunt Elizabeth, his cousin John, this was a dance of life and death that Jesus was willing to leave in the trust of God the Father. For as the Apostle Paul later phrased it, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

Twenty five years ago, **Michael Flagtly**, the Irish dancer of world renown, put together a road show entitled, **"The Lord of the Dance."** In this show, he sought to prove, as he claimed and he very well may have been, that he was the greatest dancer alive – if not of all time. Throughout this show, the theme is a simple melody which we would recognize as the tune to the shaker hymn **"Simple gifts."**

Something always bothered me about that because the show, **"The Lord of the Dance,"** is anything but simple and it is driven by everything but humility. And where did he get that title, **"The Lord of the Dance?"** Then I remembered a 1960's song written by Sydney Carter and sung by every Christian youth group in my day titled, "Lord of the Dance," sung to the melody of "Simple Gifts," but **the Lord it celebrates is Jesus Christ and the dance it is talking about is a dance that has gone on since the beginning of time.**

You may not consider it much of a Christmas gift – but I would like to share the song with you. (please chorus as you catch the tune).

LORD OF THE DANCE

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I danced in the morning, When the world was begun,
And I danced in the moon, And the stars and the sun,

And I came down from heaven, and I danced on the earth
In Bethlehem I had my birth.

Refrain:

Dance then wherever you may be, I am the Lord of the Dance said He
And I'll lead you all, Wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all, In the dance said He.

Some thirty-three years after their birth both John and Jesus will be killed by evil men seeking to silence their voice. Mary's heart will be crushed (and if Elizabeth were still around, so also would hers) but that is a future event for them and a future celebration for us – since Jesus wisely advised us to “*seek first his kingdom and let tomorrow take care of itself*” (Matt. 6:33-34). So today, let us join with the dancing babies and their singing mothers to celebrate the coming of the Messiah. Merry Christmas!