

THE MAGNIFICAT: AN ODE TO JOY OR A CALL TO REVOLUTION?

A Sermon by Miss (Martha) Shiverick

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

Cleveland Heights, Ohio

December 16, 2007

Luke 1:47-55

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm; 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.
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Here we are not even half way into the first chapter of Luke, and already so much has happened. So, let me refresh your memory if you have not read these first verses since last the last Advent season. After Luke dedicated his book to Theophilus, he begins to tell the story of John the Baptist and Jesus' births. He tells it in a common Hebrew literary style of showing the two stories running parallel. He begins by setting the scene for John's birth. It was a pregnancy which was highly unlikely given Elizabeth's age so when the angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah and prophesized it, he questioned him about it. The angel made him mute until the child was born as a punishment for his unbelief. And as we know, the angel was correct and Elizabeth became pregnant. When Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she too would become pregnant but by the Holy Spirit and have a son who will be called Son of God. Unlike Zechariah, Mary responds with faithful acceptance to this news.

After Mary becomes pregnant, she goes to visit Elizabeth. The unborn John responds to Mary's visit by leaping in Elizabeth's womb, to which Elizabeth replies by recognizing the holiness of Mary's pregnancy and making a confession of faith that Mary is indeed carrying the Lord and that God's word is fulfilled in this pregnancy.

Mary responds to Elizabeth with her song which we know as the Magnificat. Later in the chapter, John is born and Zechariah gets his voice back just as the

angel had foretold. Zechariah ends the chapter with his own song of praise for his child's birth. The reason it is important to know this is because of the controversy about whether the Magnificat is Mary's song or is it Elizabeth's as some scholars have thought. It is now thought that it must definitely be authored by Mary, as if it wasn't, it would not fit with the parallel story-telling found throughout this first chapter. Both children have their births foretold; both children have their parent's song. The magnificat is Mary's song and the second song is by Zechariah. It wouldn't make sense if both were attributed to John's parents. It wouldn't be a part of the writing style of Luke.

Yes, the Magnificat is a song of Joy. Its name comes from the opening word in the Greek translation that will be sung at the 11:00 service. Joy is a recurring theme in Luke. It is also a song of praise and thanksgiving for God's redeeming work. God is the savior and God's role as savior is seen in the works of Jesus. However these works of Jesus that are described by Mary give the song a much deeper message than just a joyful explanation. Mary's words are revolutionary, Mary's words speak of transformation, and Mary's words are not soothing, but are words of change. One documentary I read on this passage called it the most revolutionary document in the world.

When I was a rebellious teenager my parents gave me a book called "Revolution Now" which from its jacket cover looked like it could be a call for active social justice from the 60's. And because of the faulty advertising on the book cover I picked it up and read what I would have just put up on my shelf if they had told me what it really was. You see it was a revolutionary document, but it was a book about Jesus' teachings and how following Jesus meant working for social change. They had tricked me into reading a book on religion and faith!!!

And in much the same way we get lured into Mary's song. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." It starts out as a feel good Prayer of Adoration, but then it abruptly changes into a call for revolution and change. Yes, there is loveliness in the Magnificat, but within the loveliness there is also dynamite! This promised baby will bring change; this promised baby will make reversals. And the first one Mary states is in the choice of her being the baby's mother. Mary thanks God for bestowing upon her, a handmaiden of lowly estate the greatest honor of all: to be the savior's mother. Shouldn't this be given to someone of more standing in the community than her? If God gives this honor to Mary, then what will God do for the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed of the world?

This baby Jesus will also bring about other revolutions and reversals. Mary says he will scatter the proud in the plans and thoughts of their hearts. There is going

to be a moral revolution where Christianity will be the death of pride. Ways that we measured ourselves, through wealth, power, and prestige, will all go away. Good looks, popularity, and social status become superfluous. Perhaps it is because when we measure ourselves next to Christ, we can not be proud. Jesus is the measuring tool by which we are now judged. We look like the portrait of Dorian Grey which we wish to hide in the closet so no one can see.

Mary then says that Jesus will bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly. This baby Mary is to have makes a social revolution where the humble are now exalted and the powerless, the downtrodden are to rule. For those of us who enjoy the fruits of society and position, this is beginning to sound like a scary scenario, not one of comfort and joy! But when you realize that to have faith in a God who loves all, Christianity puts an end to any labels that would separate one from another. All are equal in God's eyes. All are unworthy of God's love and mercy, and still all are loved. Stopping societal and economic inequalities becomes the calling of the Christian.

Mary sings that the baby Jesus will fill the hungry with good thing and will send the rich away empty. This is an economic revolutionary statement. The reversal Mary speaks of in this phrase states that the follower of Jesus must work to make a world where no one has too much while others have too little. When our plates are full and others are starving, it is contrary to Christ's message. We know the call to the church is not to care for ourselves but to every one of God's children who are in need, who live in poverty, violence, war, or do not enjoy the securities of life that we do. That is a mighty heavy calling!

Mary's song of praise is a very revolutionary statement. This baby will bring joy to the world but will also bring great change, social upheaval, and give great responsibility to all that follow his teachings. It is not a pleasant song, but a call, a charge, and the realization that this child will indeed change the world forever.

So we wait for Christ to come into our lives again this year and to fill us with God's spirit. Do we really know what we are asking for? Do we know the transforming power of God with us?

When I told my mother I was pregnant with our oldest child Asa, her response surprised me at the time. Oh, she was happy for me and that she was going to be a grandmother (I should add since she is here today that she was going to be a very young one!) but her happy response was also mixed with sadness and a concern for me. She said everything changes when you have a baby. You no longer can be selfish or think of yourself first. And those of us that are parents know that this is very true. In the joyful event of the birth of a child, a transformation occurs as

well. As the infant is born the young couple becomes parents and in an instant their lives are not just theirs any more but are there for the child.

We are preparing for another birth that is coming very soon. Our advent calendars tick off the days until the blessed event! We have decorated our homes, decorated our church, and our families have made plans to get together. Some of us are busy sending cards and other holiday greetings and exchanging gifts as signs of love. To prepare, some of us have attended the Wednesday night Advent-ure dinners and study groups and some of us have attended musical events that spiritually bring us to the season. What we do in Advent is prepare for the birth of the Christ child in our lives. We are hoping and praying that this year the event transforms us; that within the Christmas event faith, spirituality and commitment grow within us. We know that our faith changes us and has changed others. I was sitting at the Guild lunch this week with one of our members who is a resident at Judson and her aid who escorted her. I got into a discussion with the aid as to how her faith has affected her work. She shared with me that because she knows Christ cares for her, she cares for others. How many of us have been with someone who witnessed the transforming power of Jesus in their lives? It happens all the time! And how many of us have had our faith help us through a difficult time in our lives or have been touched by someone showing Christian love and care to us in a time of need? Experiencing Christ in our lives is revolutionary and transforming. Experiencing Christ changes us. And that is for what we pray and hope each Advent. I pray that this year we get what we are hoping for! Amen.

The Rev. Martha (Missy) Shiverick, MD.V., M.S.