

Luke 2: 46-55 An Upside Down World

As I was preparing today's sermon, I was listening to a play list of Christmas music that I have saved on my computer. It includes many of my favorite hymns which can be and are sung during worship services this time of year. It also contains a couple of songs that are beyond the ability of most congregations and many choirs to sing—the Halleluiah Chorus from the Messiah and the Magnificat. Both have lyrics that are literally scripture set to music. The combination of the musical scores and the lyrics are beautiful and emotionally moving. The scriptural basis for the Halleluiah Chorus is found in the book of Revelation. What is more to the point today is the Magnificat is drawn from this morning's gospel text from Luke. It is often called Mary's Song of Praise and most translations that use passage introductions list it as such. Several composers have set these words to music, including Bach and Mozart. Verses 47-50 which begin the song are surely wonderful words of praise for the Lord. "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor upon the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generation will call me blessed: for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name." If you think about it, why would Mary lift a song of praise for what has happened? If we go back to verse 26 when the angel Gabriel is sent to the village of Nazareth in Galilee we meet Mary for the first time. Nazareth was not a town where the powerful or wealthy dwelled. This makes her self-identification as a lowly servant fitting. Mary is a young woman who is engaged to the carpenter Joseph. Engagements in that culture usually happened around the age of twelve. However Gabriel greets her as "favored one." This puzzles her as she has no indications of receiving favor in her life—no wealth or status. The next thing Gabriel says to her is to not be afraid. Mary is told by this heavenly messenger that she is going to bear a Son because she has found favor with God. Her response in verse 34 is logical: "Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin.'" The Greek literally reads, "Since I have known no man." The angel's response is that it will be so because the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High will "overshadow you". At the time when Luke is writing there is no formal understanding of the Trinity, but Luke clearly states that the child which will be born will be holy and the Son of God. After giving her this news the angel departs, leaving Mary with no information about how her situation will unfold. When her pregnancy becomes known, there will be a scandal that has Joseph thinking about breaking the engagement because he is a righteous man. Her condition according to the law of the time could have led to her being stoned to death. Is this truly a sign of God's favor? The angel also tells Mary her barren cousin Elizabeth has conceived a child in her old age. All of this is occurring because "nothing will be impossible with God" according to her angelic visitor. Mary declares her acceptance of what she has been told. She then set off "with haste" to visit with this cousin Elizabeth who is now six months pregnant with John the Baptist. Elizabeth greets her with the Phrase: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." This is another time she is described as blessed. Now instead of just acceptance, we see Mary as embracing her role. It is that we find her song of praise for what God has done for her. As we know the story continues with the journey to Bethlehem in the ninth month of her pregnancy because the government has demanded a census and for tax accounting purposes. Blessed indeed. Surely this is an ironic favoring Mary has been given. When they get to Bethlehem, the birth of the child comes in a stable where there is no mother, no grandmother or even a

midwife in attendance. This firstborn child of hers will spend his first night in an animal feeding trough. Blessed indeed. Again, this favor she has received is surely an ironic description. When Mary sings her song, she sings of a God who blesses not only her but who also blesses the world with healing and restoration. She sings of a God who turns the world upside down—where the proud are scattered, the powerful are brought down, the rich go away empty while the hungry are fed. Wait a minute—is this reversal really a reversal in God’s eyes—or is it turning the world right side up again? The interesting thing about her description of these great things is that she describes them as occurring in the past tense. She sings as if the things she is singing about have already happened. God has lifted up the lowly, God has filled the hungry with good things. In English translations the verb tense used is the past tense. God has already accomplished this righting of the world. We commonly understand what Mary does in the Magnificat as expressing hope. We know that in chronological time, in the linear time which governs our world, pain and suffering still abound. Yet Mary’s Song is placed into a realm in which God’s sense of time, which is so different from ours, has taken hold. Mary’s description of the world uses a tense we don’t actually have in English, the aortic past tense. It is a tense which describes actions which begin in the past and then continue into the present and even into the future. Perhaps that is the best way to understand any actions of God who is eternal. What are we then to take away from Mary’s Song of praise? One obvious thing about her song is that it expresses hope and trust. Her song is an echo of other songs sung in scripture like Hannah’s song. It is an expression of hope that has sustained people for generations, the hope of people who have believed in what God has and would do. People who have chosen to participate with God in the healing and restoration of the world. Mary’s singing praises to God as she embraced the role she was given did not mean that she suddenly lived in a different world. She still had that journey to Bethlehem to make. She still would watch that miraculous child take an even more difficult journey to the cross as part of God’s mighty acts to redeem, to heal, to restore the world. The brokenness of the world still existed then as she was singing. It still exists today. But what Mary knew and what we know is that the brokenness does not and will not have the final word. That final word has already been said by God. It is the Word of redemption which will be completed when Christ comes again. In their declaration that Mary was blessed, neither Gabriel nor Elizabeth promised Mary an easy life. And God does not promise us easy lives either. Gabriel’s complete greeting to Mary was, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” This last portion of the greeting is a promise to Mary that God would be with her. We have been given this same promise, even in one of the names that by which that infant became known: Emmanuel—God with us. This is God’s promise: not an easy life, but the presence of God through all of it. Whatever happens, we are not alone. That is the true promise, the true meaning of the whole Christmas narrative. The promise that God is not “up there” or “out there”. The promise that God has not chosen divine distance or majestic isolation, but rather God has chosen to be in our midst. This knowledge of God with us is empowering. It enables us to live so as to participate in God’s realm even in the midst of our present broken reality. It enables us to love as we are loved. It enables us to overcome fear and prejudice. It enables to live in this world as if it were truly God’s righted, restored, whole world. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.