

“The Revolutionary Magnificat”

Luke 1:39-56

December 18, 2011

INTRODUCTION:

One particularly enjoyable part of Christmas, for me and for many others, is the singing of Christmas hymns. The hymnals in your pew racks arrange the hymns topically, and they have a section called “His Advent” and “His Birth.” Those two sections, containing our well-known Christmas hymns, extend from hymn #193-233, a total of 41 hymns. The next section, called “His Life, Ministry and Obedience,” runs from #234-241, only 8 hymns. There is something about Christmas, when rightly understood, that makes you want to sing.

It was that way for Luke. He is the only of the four authors of the Gospels who records four nativity hymns. The four are commonly referred to by the first word of the hymn in the Latin Vulgate. The first is the *Magnificat*, Mary’s hymn that we are going to consider today. The second is Zechariah’s *Benedictus* (1:68-79), followed by the shortest of the hymns, the *Gloria* of the angelic choir that appeared to the shepherds. The final one is Simeon’s *Nunc Dimittis*, Latin for ‘now let depart.’ With the opening of the New Testament era comes a flourishing of music for the simple reason that the good news of Jesus provides us something to sing about.

I would like us to approach this passage by asking an application question. Are you hearing the music of the gospel in your heart right now? Is there a joy and lightness in your heart because of the gifts Jesus brings to us through his birth, death and resurrection, or is there just the heaviness of multiplied duties needing to be performed? Do your feet want to dance, or are you more like the plow horse who simply keeps putting one foot in front of the other? Please don’t hear these questions as adding to your burdens by reminding you of yet one more obligation among an already lengthy list. Don’t hear them as the Lord telling you that not only do you need to make sure you buy all those gifts and attend all those functions that you’re supposed to attend, but now you need to like it. Hear this not as Jesus’ condemnation, but as his invitation to hear again, or for the first time, the music of the gospel.

Mary’s *Magnificat* can teach us to hear again the music of the gospel. Stanley Jones called the *Magnificat* “the most revolutionary document in the world.” That’s a shocking description of these words from a Jewish teenager who is largely weaving together one Scripture after another in this song. But I think he’s right. I notice three revolutions here, each of which helps restore to us the music of the gospel.

I. Joy Centered on Jesus – A Psychological Revolution

We hear the music of the gospel when our hearts are filled with joy. I notice three things about joy in this passage. First, it is supernatural joy. The first trimester of Mary's pregnancy was spent with her relative, Elizabeth. After Gabriel met with Mary to give her the news of God's choice of her to be the mother of God's Son, though she was a virgin, she leaves immediately to visit Elizabeth. Luke adds that she **"went with haste"** to make this journey, and many have pondered the reason for her haste. Some think it's because of the inherent difficulties of being pregnant and unwed in a traditional culture like this. I don't think that was the reason. No one had to know of her pregnancy at this point, since it was the first trimester. Besides, Luke informs us that she returned to Nazareth after her first three months with Elizabeth, at the time she would begin to show her pregnancy. I think she went to visit Elizabeth simply because she wanted to share in Elizabeth's joy of being pregnant with her first baby in her old age. Gabriel had informed Mary of this pregnancy (v. 36), and she went in haste because it was a four day journey to Elizabeth's home. Mary's joy in Elizabeth's pregnancy, and Elizabeth's joy in the same, is an example of a natural joy when longed for things happen.

But there is another joy in this passage, a supernatural joy when Mary arrived at Elizabeth's house. Something happened that Luke emphasizes by reporting it twice in just a few verses. **"And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb"** (v. 42). Then in her prophetic, Spirit-filled utterance, Elizabeth speaks of it again. **"When the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy"** (v. 44). Babies can't stand or walk, and they certainly can't jump. Babies in their mother's womb have even less ability. Yet we have here a leaping baby in the case of Elizabeth's baby, who would grow up to be the one known as John the Baptist. The point is this: Jesus brings a supernatural joy into our lives. If the presence of Jesus can make a fetus at six months leap for joy, what can it do for one who is mature?

The second thing I see about this joy is that it is deeply rooted in the heart. Notice the first two lines of Mary's hymn. **"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."** This joy was deep in her heart, in the place she calls her soul and her spirit. It wasn't a superficial or sentimental joy, but a foundational joy deep in the heart. It was a joy that would be able to withstand the many hardships to come for Mary. She was already dealing with the hardship of wondering what would become of her, a pregnant, unwed young woman. She still didn't know how Joseph would respond. Much of what was ahead of her she still didn't know. She knew nothing of her forced march back to Bethlehem during the last days of her pregnancy, nor of her refugee status as a young mother while escaping to Egypt when King Herod was trying

to kill her baby. But there is a foundational joy that will persist even in the face of severe suffering. That's the joy Mary reports here deep in her soul.

A third thing we learn about this joy is that it is centered on Jesus. It was when Mary entered the room, in the early stages of her pregnancy with Jesus, that Elizabeth's baby leaped in the womb. And Mary said that she rejoiced in God her Savior. True and lasting joy is centered on Jesus.

II. Faith in God's Word – A Spiritual Revolution

Where did Mary's joy come from? How do we come to hear the music in our own hearts? Speaking by the power of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth gives us the answer. **“And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord”** (v. 45). She believed God's word. Joy is a fruit of believing. God had told her through the angel Gabriel that she would become impregnated by the Holy Spirit with the Son of God. And she believed God and submitted to him in those well-known words of verse 37. **“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”**

If believing God is the source of joy, then we need to make sure we understand what it means to believe God. I notice that Mary's faith was more than mere intellectual assent, because it was followed up by her complete submission to God. The key component of her faith was trust in God, indicated by her submission. Mary didn't just believe that God had the power to make babies grow in the wombs of young virgins. She personalized it and submitted to God's announced desire to do so in her life, though she knew it would bring some difficulty upon her.

One of the biggest reasons the music of the gospel gets silenced in our lives is that we slip into a type of faith that is nothing more than this intellectual assent. There is a big difference between intellectual assent to God's word and trusting God's word. Let me illustrate that difference. If I were ask for a show of hands to this question, I would imagine that I would get near one-hundred percent agreement. The question is, “Do you believe God could provide you with a new job if you were to lose your current job?” To answer yes is good, but it is still just intellectual assent. Now imagine that you actually lose your job and have to trust God for another. Remembering that Jesus taught that one of the marks of trusting God is to be free from anxiety, the same question becomes much more difficult to answer. Do you still believe God can provide you with a new job, to the point that you are free from anxiety?

The most recent issue of *byFaith* magazine features an interview with Tullian Tchividjian about his new book *Jesus + Nothing = Everything*. Tchividjian was called to pastor Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church after the

death of its founding pastor, James Kennedy. Shortly after his arrival in 2009, a large group of influential church members became so dissatisfied with his leadership that they undertook an effort to have him removed as their pastor. In our denomination, the PCA, which is also the denominational affiliation of Coral Ridge, only the congregation can vote to oust a pastor. But only the Session (the name for a Presbyterian church's governing board) can call a congregational meeting, and Coral Ridge's Session did not want to do so. But a congregation can compel the Session to take this action with enough signatures on a petition. So right under his nose, dissatisfied members began accumulating these signatures, an effort that proved successful, and a congregational meeting was called for the purpose of voting on whether or not to retain him as their pastor. The vote failed, and Tchividjian was allowed to continue as their pastor. But many who were unhappy with him decided to leave the church as a result of this vote. All of this was particularly difficult for Tchividjian because he said that the approval of others was something that had become too important to him. He could preach that Jesus was all one needed, that Jesus plus nothing equals everything. But it was only when he lost the approval of others, when so many influential people were against him, that he really came to trust that Jesus really was enough for him.

I think Mary went through a similar process. Her faith became more than intellectual assent as she learned to trust God through the difficulties of her life in the wake of the angel's announcement. Joy comes through this kind of trust, when you realize that God's promise and presence is both all you have and all you need.

There are two things we can see in the text that help Mary move beyond intellectual assent into trust. First, she knew the Scriptures. Her hymn is mostly a weaving together of many different passages from the Old Testament. All together, there are quotes or allusions to verses from eleven books of the Old Testament. Mary had learned her Old Testament well, probably by singing these passages as she grew up, and God used this to help her come to trust him through his word. A second thing that helps Mary trust God is being encouraged by Elizabeth. I find it striking that Mary's song comes not after the angel Gabriel met with her and announced his news, but after Elizabeth brings essentially the same message. The lesson for us is that our faith is strengthened and intensified in community with other Christians, even more so than if angels were to meet with us and bring us God's words. If you're not involved in Christian community where this happens, you are missing one of the great aids to faith that God offers to us.

III. Reversal of the Little People and the Big People – A Social Revolution

Probably the most prominent theme of Mary's song is the theme of reversal. Mary celebrates the fact that in this good news, God **“has scattered the proud**

in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate” (v. 51-52). The coming of Jesus is good news for the humble and bad news for the proud. Those who have lifted up themselves will be brought low, while those who have been brought low will be lifted up by God.

This idea of pride as a lifting up of oneself is very helpful. To be proud is like one who seeks to raise himself up on stilts so as to be higher than others. The problem with walking on stilts, though, is that it is inherently more unstable than walking just on your God-given legs. If you would hear the music of the gospel, you must identify the stilts you are using and put them away through repentance. What are some stilts people employ? Parents sometimes try to lift themselves up by taking pride in children. I notice here how Elizabeth shows such great humility in lifting up not her own son, but Mary’s baby. She pronounced blessing upon the fruit of Mary’s womb over her own. Some of the standard ways we try to walk on stilts include money, accomplishments and human approval. Then if we can’t get as high on our stilts as we would like, we seek to elevate ourselves by pointing out how other’s stilts are not as high as our own. The term for this is gossip, which refers to the words that flow out of that attitude that secretly delights in bad things happening to those viewed as rivals.

If we would hear the music of the gospel, we will need to throw away our stilts and be perfectly willing to take whatever place God assigns to us. We can all learn about this from this young teenager, Mary, as she says to the angel Gabriel, **“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word”** (v. 38). She was content to fill whatever space God determined for her, whether small or large. If there was to be any lifting up, God would do it.

CONCLUSION:

Mary’s firstborn Son would later exhibit the same attitude of humility. He would walk this same road from Galilee to Judea and to its capital city, Jerusalem. His destination would not be the welcoming home of a loving relative, but the hill called Golgotha, upon which he was raised up on a cross. He did so in obedience to the will of his heavenly Father.

Jesus did this that all who humble themselves and confess their sins might be given new life. The paradox of the gospel, seen here from the very beginning, is that it is those who humble themselves in this manner who hear the music. May God grant you ears to hear the music, as you humbly own your sins and receive the gift of forgiveness through Christ!