

"A magnificent song of Joy"  
Sermon on Sunday, December 17, 2023

Dear church,

What we just heard was a song of pure joy, stylized by Luke, no doubt, composed by someone other than Mary, I am sure, but expressing in no uncertain terms the miraculous transformation of a humble life. And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed..."

Mary spills out her heart after her relative Elizabeth, the expectant mother of John the Baptist, acknowledges Mary's blessedness as the mother of Jesus. The song is often called the "Magnificat" which means "praise" or "magnify," from the Latin translation of its first line: *magnificat anima mea Dominum* (literally, "My soul magnifies the Lord").

Mary's song focuses on God's tendency to turn everything upside down, to counter the typical power structures and elevate humanity over status. The Holy One revealed in our Bible does not care much about status. This much becomes abundantly clear when we read the story of the Nativity or any other story in the New Testament. In the Christian gospel it is always humanity over status. Always. People have asked, "Why do we need the Bible, Jesus, the gospel?" What makes it so special? My answer: it is so consistent in this message: before God it's always humanity over status!

And so, Mary sings the gospel and musicians have taken note, literally. Perhaps the gospel is best understood as a song anyway, something that stirs our souls and reverberates through our bodies and lives, the spirit of God playing the keys of our soul and conducting our life's song before a heavenly audience. Is that not a wonderful view of Christian discipleship? So, Mary sings the gospel...She sings... "he took notice of his lowly servant girl," rather than selecting a woman of prominence (1:48). The Lord "scattered the proud and haughty ones," rather than giving them even more status (1:51). "He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands" (1:52-53). Forget about FDR's New Deal. This is God's New Deal, and it inverts human structures and corrects the human tendency to define people by titles and status symbols. It's a big deal!

I must also say that the Magnificat, which sounds as comforting, as it is hopeful and radical, is also a bit problematic, at least when we take the words literally. I am a student of history. I read a few history-books every year and try to pay attention to what's happening in our world. I know, when the proud and the powerful are pushed from their thrones and the people are suddenly elevated to power, it often ends up in anarchy and chaos. We have an example for that in America's recent foreign adventures. Following the fall of Saddam Hussein, a ruthless dictator, made possible by American intervention, Iraq became not necessarily a better country compared to what it was under the old dictator's rule. Sadly so.

History has many examples for that... The Russian Revolution, the chaos in Germany after the last Emperor went into exile... the end of Yugoslavia... many of those places could not handle the divergent interests of people, ethnicities and interest groups, powerful forces that bubbled up from below. Often enough the energy of liberation turned into a civil war or a different form of dictatorship. That's why I am a little bit cautious when I hear those lines: "He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble." "What comes next," we must wonder.

Of course, I believe that we must read Mary's Magnificat with a spiritual rather than a political lens. That's how I read the Bible anyhow. And how could we not take that approach? Jesus, as we know him, never sought to obtain worldly power. He never made any attempt to mess with the messy political realities of his lifetime. Yet, he was as revolutionary as Mary's Magnificat suggests. He stood for a revolution from within. He was all about restoring humanity. Read the gospels, it's obvious!

What if Mary sings and marvels about the powerful rulers in our own hearts that are thrown from their thrones, our egotistical tendencies, our need to dominate, to possess, to wield influence? We all have those parts in ourselves, and they are not bad parts, but we must outgrow them and can do so with the help of Christ. We must outgrow them because otherwise they become harmful. And then we discover the gentler parts in ourselves. That's how I understand the Magnificat. It's not just about Mary, the poor young mother who is exalted in this story. And it's not just about Jesus the Messiah as he shows up in the gospels. It is also and perhaps most importantly about you and me.

Who is on the throne in our lives? Which are the humble voices in our souls whose hour has come? God is re-born in every human being. We just need to become aware of the miracle of his visiting us, re-making us, and blessing us more deeply. It's magnificent. It's our song of joy. "Magnificat anima mea Dominum!" Amen.