

Advent 4C 2018 Sermon

December 23, 2018

Canticle 15, The Song of Mary (*Magnificat, Luke 1:46-55*)

*"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."*

Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

*"My soul magnifies the Lord...
for the Mighty One has done great things for me...
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..."*

Our lectionary does things a little backwards today: as usual, we said our Canticle (which sometimes replaces the psalm in our worship), *before* the Epistle and Gospel reading. But the fact is that the **words** of our Canticle today, the Song of Mary, are the verses from Luke that directly **follow** our Gospel reading. Mary's song is sung *in response* to Elizabeth's words, but our lectionary today

has us read Mary's **response** *before* we read Elizabeth's words. The timeline is out of order.

And yet, "it is meet and right" that we so do at this time of year! For getting things out of order in terms of time is what *happens* during Advent, this season of the year when we *wait* for something that has already happened – the birth of Jesus.

Mary's Song (sometimes called by its Latin name, "the *Magnificat*"), is itself confused regarding time. Author and blogger Julie Clawson became acutely aware of this when she took an unusual final exam in her college Theology class. "Instead of complex essay questions," she writes, "[my final exam] was one simple question: defend the grammar of the *Magnificat*." Defend the grammar of the Song of Mary. Clawson goes on:

"How can Mary sing that the Lord *has done* great things for her? It's a little crazy: how can this young, lower-class girl who finds herself knocked up sing that God has *already*--in the **past tense**--ended injustice and oppression? All she has to do is look around her to find evidence to the contrary."¹

Now, I had never given it much thought, but Julie Clawson is right: The recurring past tense in Mary's Song is *remarkable*. The Mighty One "**has** scattered the proud... **has** brought down the powerful from their thrones... **has** lifted up the lowly... **has** filled the hungry with good things... **has** sent the rich away empty." But just this week I read that Jeff Bezos (founder and CEO of Amazon) makes more money in *one minute* than the average American makes in 4 years! The rich have yet to be sent away empty.²

So, going back to Julie Clawson's final exam question, how **do** we defend the grammar of Mary's song? How do we understand her use of the past tense?

My friends, it is an important question, for so much of our Christian faith involves the interpenetration of past, present, and future. You heard me say on All Saints' Sunday that when the procession at the beginning of each Eucharist moves from the entryway of the Church toward the altar, our spirits move **with** the procession *from* the world outside those doors *into* a place where time and space are suspended, and all the faithful who have ever lived or ever **will** live are present with us in what we call the communion of saints. Past, present, *and* future are **one** *whenever* we celebrate Eucharist.

In the Eucharistic prayer, we repeat the words of Jesus, "Do this in remembrance of me." That word "remembrance" is the scholar's feeble attempt to translate the Greek New Testament word *anamnesis*, a word with no equivalent in English; a word which *really* means that the past is brought into the present, and we are once again in that upper room with the disciples the night before Jesus was crucified – or it could be equally said that Jesus and the disciples are present here with us at

Eucharist, and it is as if it is all happening again for the first time. The *past* is **alive** in the *present* – **that** is what is happening when we “Do this in remembrance” of him.

And I think that understanding this central concept of *anamnesis* in the Eucharist can help us make sense of this mysterious Advent time when we *await the already*: the birth of Jesus. We wait for that which happened in Bethlehem to happen *today* in our hearts, as if it were happening for the first time.

Now, if *anamnesis* – “Do this in *remembrance*” – means bringing what occurred in the past dynamically into the present, there is a contrasting word Biblical scholars use – *prolepsis* – which means to “live out in the present moment the very future God has promised for us and our world.” (p. 21) Webster’s dictionary defines *prolepsis* as “the representation or assumption of a future act... as if presently existing or accomplished.”³ My friends, this is **exactly** what is happening in Mary’s Song!

At our Thursday Eucharist at Hildebrand, we read the Song of Mary, and we discussed the fact that Mary is living in a moment of miracles: she herself has become pregnant without any sexual intercourse – a physical impossibility; *and* she is visiting Elizabeth, who, though beyond the years of child-bearing, is nonetheless pregnant. As one of you said at Hildebrand, Mary is, at this point, so very open to the inbreaking of the divine into her very being, she is so pregnant with Christ, that she *participates* in divine reality and **experiences** the *future* promises of God as though they have already happened. When I prepare the bread and wine at the offertory, and pour some water into the wine, I say (aloud or silently), “As the co-mingling of this water and this wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” Mary is doing just this: participating in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in her humanity – to be conceived within her – conceived within her soul as well as her body. Mary is participating in God’s kingdom, which is not simply in the future; it can be experienced in the present by those like Mary who participate in the life of God here and now.

And what does that kingdom of God look like? According to Mary’s song, it looks like this: the proud are scattered in the thoughts of their hearts, the powerful have been brought down, the lowly have been lifted up, the hungry have been filled with good things, and the rich have been sent away empty (and remember, *spiritually* speaking, emptying is a **good** thing!). **This** is the kingdom of heaven which Mary *sees* and *experiences*, the future-and-already kingdom, the kingdom for which we pray, “thy kingdom come *on earth* as it is in heaven.”

And, my friends, if *Mary* is experiencing in the present this reality that God has promised, **we** can do the same! **We** can participate in God’s coming kingdom here and now, participate in lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things.

And this, indeed, is what we are *doing* with our “Friend-a-Child” project with El Hogar; this is what we are doing with our “Reverse Advent” food collection; this is what Ron Walsh is doing by sacrificing his own sleep that others might have a warm place to sleep; this is what we are doing with Laundry Love and with our Little Free Pantry. We *see* all of this more clearly at this time of year when heaven comes to earth, and God is born in human flesh. Time is suspended, and **we participate** in that incarnation of divine love, in the fulfillment of the divine promise that God “lifts up the lowly” and “fills the hungry with good things.” Past, present, and future interpenetrate each other during this season when “The hopes and fears of **all** the years” – past, present, and future – are met in the Bethlehems of our own hearts.

AMEN

1 <http://julieclawson.com/2010/12/22/marys-grammar/>

2 <http://time.com/money/5192998/jeff-bezos-net-worth-2018-worlds-richest-man/>

3 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prolepsis>