

Sermon: Magnify

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

24 December 2017

Based on **Luke 1:26-38**; **Luke 1:46b-55**

In the sanctuary at St. John the Evangelist Church on Main Street, there is a wooden carving of St. Luke. Below it, at eye level, is a carved panel that shows Luke's emblem, which is a painter's palette. When I asked why a palette, I was told that of all the Christian writers, Luke 'painted with words.'

In his prologue to his Gospel, Luke indeed paints a picture, telling us that he has decided to present an 'orderly account' of the events which have been fulfilled among us. His goal is not to write a biography or a history, but a narrative, one which happens to have an intricate structure that reaches way back into Scripture for its imagery.

In the first two chapters, Luke interweaves two story lines. After the prologue, we have the announcement of John the Baptist's impending birth, followed by the announcement of Jesus' impending birth, which we heard just now. Then the two mothers meet, which makes sense because they are relatives. Then Luke tells us that John is born, followed by Jesus.

Among all this, we hear Mary's praise for God, then Zechariah's prophecy, followed by an angel's praise for God, saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors,' which is followed by another prophecy. All this happens before Jesus is nine days old.

Just in today's two readings, there are echoes of Miriam's victory song when God delivered the Israelites out of Egypt; 'Miriam' and 'Mary' are linguistically equivalent names between the Hebrew and the Greek. But we are also reminded of other unexpected pregnancies: Hannah, Samuel's mother; Sarah, Isaac's mother in Genesis; Samson's unnamed mother in Judges; and even Elizabeth, Mary's kinswoman.

Somehow, Mary has found favor with God. God looked favorably on all of these women; we don't know why, and we don't need to know. It's enough that God knows.

Our English translation has Luke calling Mary a ‘virgin,’ twice, once from her own mouth. What he probably means is a young woman, an early teen, who is engaged to Joseph but not yet married to him. All of the other unexpected pregnancies happened to women who were beyond their child-bearing years, but Mary, a young woman, isn’t quite there yet. Her pregnancy is just as much of a surprise as it would be for someone like Sarah. And I think that’s why Luke offers that contrast, to highlight that both are within the realm of divine possibilities. Either way, Mary is an exceptional young woman, blessed by God, and worthy of honor.

When we read these two passages in Advent, and they’re always read in week four in the lectionary cycle, we tend to overlook a few things in our excitement about Christmas, *which is tomorrow*. We overlook the subversive nature of Luke’s narrative, and we hardly ever notice that Mary, the blessed virgin mother of God, is also a prophet.

When the angel said to Mary, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God,’ two things happened. First, Jesus’ conception, of course. That happened. But we can also say that in this verse, the Holy Spirit endows Mary with the ability to deliver the prophet-like speech from our second reading.

Mary’s speech, a song, really, includes prophetic themes: vindication of the weak; judgement against the arrogant; lifting up of the lowly; and a reversal of fortunes for the rich and the poor. Mary is empowered by the Holy Spirit to be a servant of the Lord.

This is where Luke’s narrative begins to get subversive: prophets tend to be political, from Miriam to Isaiah to John the Baptist. Luke has already given us some clues by placing the entire narrative in a political context when he tells us that it all takes place during the reign of King Herod, who was put on the throne by the Romans.

When Luke mentions the Good News, or David’s throne, or how Jesus will reign over the house of Jacob in a kingdom without end – this is all political speech. Anyone hearing or reading Luke’s Gospel in the first century would know how to interpret a story like this. What Luke wants us to understand is that Jesus – God-with-us – didn’t come to take Caesar’s job but to undermine the values that propped up the social, economic, and political institutions in Israel and Judah, and throughout the wider Roman world.

So, skipping over a lot of history 2,000 years later, how might we interpret a story like this? Would we miss it entirely because now *everything* seems to be political? What can we learn from Luke and apply to life today?

A lot of people around the world like to compare the United States of today with the Romans of the first century. It's true that we project economic and military power across the globe, and our politics do influence other countries. We can buy in bulk, so to speak; make advantageous trade agreements; and overrun smaller markets with our sheer size and productivity. We might as well be Wal-Mart as far as the rest of the world is concerned. We do a lot of things that make other nations uncomfortable.

It was said of the Romans that when they conquer, 'they build a desert and call it 'peace.'" We're not Rome, but we have to guard against going the way of Rome.

We mention all of this because Luke's narrative intends to show us how God has disrupted the world with the birth of these two cousins, in order to reconcile and restore the people of Israel and Judah to God, so that we can do the same for ourselves.

Meanwhile, God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant Mary. In fact, God offers peace and grace to everyone involved in these two pregnancies; there are no villains here. Mary admits that God has done great things for her, and holy is God's name. Mary knows and remembers what God has done, both for her personally and for her people, and grace is given to her.

The angel said to Mary, 'For nothing will be impossible with God.' That doesn't mean God will necessarily do *every* impossible thing, like win the lottery for you. It means that God is doing this *one* impossible thing right now.

The picture painted by Luke up to this point describes the birth of Mary's son as a political situation. Luke never explicitly mentions the Messiah, as Mark does. He does, however, emphasize enough times that the *Holy Spirit* is at work here and that the baby John 'will be great in the sight of the Lord' (1:15). The baby Jesus will also be great and 'be called the Son of the Most High' (1:32), the inheritor of King David's throne. Luke puts Caesar on notice right in the first chapter simply by using a few choice words which we might not notice but the powers that be in the first century would certainly recognize as a threat. And that, believe it or not, is good news.

Amen.