

Sermon: He Shall Be the One
New North Church, Hingham
Rev. Steven M. Aucella
19 December 2021

Based on **Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-45, 46-55**

Today's two readings are somewhat revolutionary. Like it or not, what John the Baptist and Jesus did in their ministries was also revolutionary, and today's readings merely get the ball rolling.

So, how are they revolutionary? Micah, hundreds of years before Luke, talks about a hoped-for ruler who trusts in God, not military might. His hope is based on the need for change. An Israeli human rights advocate named Uri Avnery says that "When you are on the top, you love stability. When you are on the bottom, you want change!"¹

Israel in both Micah's and Luke's time was most definitely on the bottom.

These readings are also revolutionary in that they call for a ruler who will bring peace; a ruler who will break the pattern of human leadership. This promised ruler will come from David's birthplace, but not to continue what David started, which was quite messy and ended in failure.

The new ruler will represent a new beginning, as a shepherd for God's people.

Back to the story. Mary set out and went *with haste* to visit her elderly kinswoman Elizabeth, who was also impossibly, miraculously, happily, pregnant. Elizabeth would give birth within three months.

But why would Mary go? Possibly because she wanted to confirm what was promised to Elizabeth; or maybe for companionship with the only person in the world who could understand her situation; or for the wisdom of an older woman and to help her through the last stages of pregnancy. Or maybe just for the fun of it. Notice she went alone; neither Zechariah nor Joseph is mentioned here.

How will this revolution happen? Through a middle-school aged girl of no social status, whose life is going to take an incredible turn for the better.

And what do these two women do next? They sing.

In our time, when do we ever sing about anything? English soccer fans sing their team songs. Red Sox fans sing *Sweet Caroline* at the drop of a hat. But we rarely sing praises to God for what God has done in the past and will do again in the future. And that is mostly because none of us has ever been in a situation like Mary's, or Elizabeth's, or Zechariah's, where an angel has delivered a message from God, and the Holy Spirit has filled us with understanding and joy.

God, said Mary, sides with the poor, the hungry, and the downtrodden. What does it mean that God sides with the lowly? How do we understand that? If we're not poor or hungry, is this good news available to us? Or are we left on the wayside?

Some in Luke's audience might have heard Mary's words and felt excluded. Lifting up the lowly and feeding the hungry is one thing, but do the rich need to go away empty as a result? Are the well-fed not qualified in any way for redemption?

Mary also said that God's mercy "is for those who fear him," with *fear* meaning awe, reverence, and obedience. Fear of God lies at the heart of successful living in the world. To fear God is to know and respect God. Anyone, rich or poor, can do this.

So, does lifting up one group necessarily mean that another group be brought down? No – a rising tide lifts all boats. The good news is for everyone who hears it.

Luke's Gospel shows a distinct contrast between the way things are and the way God would have them be.

If we compare Luke's account to Matthew's, we notice that in Luke, the angel greeted Mary as the favored one and then told her that she would conceive and bear a son and name him Jesus. And that's it. There is no mention of public disgrace; nothing about Joseph planning to dismiss Mary quietly. There is no shame in Mary's pregnancy. And if you think about it, why should there be?

Mary and Elizabeth play a fairly dramatic role in God's salvation for all the nations. From the church's perspective, Mary's visit to Elizabeth represented the first gathering of a community centered around Jesus, with John kicking in celebration too.

And when the two women shared their wonder of God's work, they didn't preach. They didn't open a Bible to study Scripture. They sang.

Mary believed the angel and now she is able to respond with praise. Her song is a description and celebration of God, and it belongs to everyone who longs for redemption

and justice, and to those who look for an end to war and oppression. Mary is so sure that God will do these things that she sings as though God has already done it.

What is happening here is that God will once again intervene in favor of the people of Israel, fulfilling promises made to Abraham and his descendants, and to David. But this new kingdom will have no end and the new king will be ‘a light for revelation to the nations’ (Luke 2:32).

People who scoff at religion often point out the improbability of Jesus’ nativity. And, on the face of it, who would base a movement, religious, social, or otherwise, on such a foundation? Especially when Jesus ends up being a convicted criminal condemned to death. No one would do that.

Looking at the Gospels as a whole, I’m reminded of our friend Hank Whittemore, who wrote, in a different context, “Regardless of our different views of the particulars, here, folks, is what really happened.”²

And this is what we know about God from Mary’s song: God is a mighty God who shows mercy to the weak; a revolutionary God willing to upset the social order in favor of the lowly; and a God who keeps ancient promises.

Mary was right. God chooses to act among and through those whom the world judges as small and insignificant, enabling them to do extraordinary and unexpected things, ‘according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.’

Amen.

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¹ Green, J. B., Long, T. G., Powery, L. A., & Rigby, C. L. (2018). Micah 5:2-5a. In *Connections, a lectionary commentary for preaching and worship* (first, Vol. 1, p. 49). essay, Westminster John Knox Press.

² Hank Whittemore, introduction to *Shakespeare and the Tudor Rose*, by Elisabeth Sears (Marshfield Hills, MA: Meadow Geese Press, 2003), xiii.