

There's Something About Mary's Song
Luke 1:39-56
December 13, 2020
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CenterPoint Church

Read Luke 1:39-56

"The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times." (Psalm 12:6)

Introduction

I've been reflecting recently on the nature of friendship, partly because this pandemic has isolated us and kept us from spending more time with friends. It feels like it has kept us from developing new friends (I'm talking about my family but also probably the whole world). Not only are many of us not going to school or work, but we're not doing a lot of the things we used to participate in. I haven't looked for a new basketball league, which has been both an exercise and social connection for me in the past. There is such a distrust of other people, if you get too close to someone in a store, what used to be just invading their personal space can be interpreted as threatening their health; you can see their eyes going "Get 6 feet away from me, please." Friendship is hard to do at a social distance. Friends have to be together, to do things together. C.S. Lewis discusses friendship and companionship in his essay *The Four Loves*: "It may be a common religion, common studies, a common profession, even a common recreation... Companionship was between two people who were doing something together – hunting, studying, painting..."¹ When you're going through something, it's always great to find a friend who is going through the same thing. So, if you're trying to achieve some workout goals, having an exercise partner can help so much. Studying for exams can be enriched with a study buddy or group. Let us pray that our friendships can blossom in 2021 and beyond.

In thinking of how going through things with others helps, I remember when my wife and my twin brother's wife were both pregnant with our first kids. They had been friends at Baylor and shared the commonality of being married to brothers (we all got married the same year), but their relationship deepened as they experienced their first pregnancies at the same time. We lived in Florida and they lived in South Carolina, and Rachel, my sister-in-law's, pregnancy was a month and a half ahead of Kath's. This was before cell phones could text or they would have had a mile-long text conversation, but they talked a lot and compared notes. It was a real comfort knowing that someone else was going through the same thing, and their relationship deepened through that shared experience.

Today's passage is an older story of two women sharing the joy of their pregnancies. We've already met both women and been told that they are related, most likely cousins or an aunt and a niece. Elizabeth, the older one, has been told that she will bear a son who will "make ready for the Lord a people prepared." Mary, the younger one, has been told she will be having a royal son, the holy Son of God. In this passage, these women met face to face, and rejoiced in God's work. And in the first 7 verses, Elizabeth rejoiced first.

I. Elizabeth: Rejoicing in God's Work in Another's Life (vv. 39-45)

³⁹ *In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, ⁴⁰ and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of*

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Inspirational Writings of C.S. Lewis* (New York: Inspirational, 1987), p. 248.

Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

Remember that last week's passage talked about Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel. He had given her a sign that would prove that God could do anything and that his announcement of her impending pregnancy despite being a virgin was true: the sign was that her relative, Elizabeth, who was barren and beyond child-bearing years, was pregnant as well. So, Mary went to see Elizabeth. I suppose this could be interpreted as an act of unbelief – that she was like Doubting Thomas who had to see Jesus in the flesh before He would believe that He had risen. In the same way, did Mary have to actually see Elizabeth's belly bump to believe the angel? But it seems that she went having already accepted the angel's word as truth; in fact, Elizabeth praised her for believing God. She wasn't going out of unbelief, but simply to share the joy of the pregnancy with her relative.

As far as we know an angel had not visited Elizabeth and explained things thoroughly to her. She had simply been told by her mute husband, Zechariah, that he had had an encounter with an angel who told him that his wife would bear a son at her old age. But there was never any mention of Mary getting pregnant as well, and certainly nothing about the baby being the Lord. Verse 41 tells us that the Holy Spirit filled Elizabeth, so He revealed to her everything she needed to know in that moment. Even little John in her womb was bouncing around he was so excited. Imagine that – a 5-month-old fetus being able to feel and respond. Remember that back in v. 15, Gabriel had told Zechariah, *"and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb."*

There was joy and amazement on Elizabeth's part for being included in these events. She was honored that Mary would come visit her; she was so humble and grateful throughout. That will be her son, John's, attitude later when he is preparing the way for Jesus in the wilderness thirty-some years later. He made it very clear to everyone listening to him that he was only the warm-up act; that Jesus, who came after him, was the one that everyone needed to hear from: *"I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before Him." The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less*" (John 3:28b-30). Elizabeth's joy and warmth for Mary reflected this posture of humility.

I wonder if Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, was sitting in the house listening to these two women talk. And I wonder how he reacted to Elizabeth's saying in verse 45 *"blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."* That could seem like a little bit of an insult to him. Why was he mute, unable to speak until the baby came? Because of his unbelief, his doubts.² Mary had exercised the gift of faith and believed what the angel told her. She had accepted what God was doing in and through her. This is reflected in the next 4 verses.

II. Mary: Rejoicing in God's Work in Her Own Life (vv. 46-49)

⁴⁶ And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

² Suggested from Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 44.

Verse 39 tells us that Mary went with “great haste” to see Elizabeth. I don’t know about you, but I think a lot on long journeys, I sometimes have to have a pen and paper next to me as I’m driving to write down things that come to me. I don’t know if Mary walked or took a donkey or what, but she had some time to think through the greater implications of the huge bombshell of an announcement that Gabriel had told her. And having arrived at Elizabeth’s house and been greeted so joyously, it made sense for Mary to respond and pour out her thoughts.

Mary’s song or poem is known as the Magnificat, which is Latin for magnify. Mary says that her soul “magnifies” the Lord, that it makes Him larger. But God is the size that He is, immense beyond human comprehension; how do we make Him larger (is that even possible)? We don’t actually make Him larger, but we consider Him in a greater way, we make Him larger in our minds and hearts. The more we read the Scriptures and treasure both His qualities (all-knowing, eternal, vast, loving, pure) and His actions (creating us, choosing us, forgiving us, guiding us), the greater our ability to think higher thoughts of Him. That is the essence of worship – to understand God better and make Him take a greater place in our minds and our lives.

Mary realized how profoundly blessed she has been and expressed her gratefulness for these great things done for her. As I mentioned last week, she probably knew that in her own lifetime she would be looked at with contempt and judgment because of the scandal of the unwed pregnancy. But she looked beyond that, realizing that she would go down in history as the mother of the Son of God – v. 48 says that “*all generations will call me blessed.*” We don’t join those who canonize Mary, call her sinless, and exaggerate her importance and role (as I discussed last week). But we also don’t want to undervalue her, she deserves to be called blessed and faithful. But the real credit and praise goes to the God who worked through her, who did mighty things for her. She is deflecting any credit and directing it all to Him, which is one of the best ways for us to emulate Mary.

After praising God for His work in her life, Mary widens the scope to God’s work in the world.

III. Mary: Rejoicing in God’s Work in the World (vv. 50-56)

⁵⁰And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; ⁵²he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” ⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

Mary realized that what God was doing in her life, using a young girl who was, essentially, a nobody in the world’s eyes to accomplish His great work of sending His own Son into the world, shows how much He defies our expectations. God has always turned the world’s values upside down, in what we would call the great reversal: the proud, rich, and mighty will be brought low and sent away empty; while the lowly, humble, and hungry will be filled up and exalted. God has shown His strength in opposing the proud and mighty, and He has shown His mercy in lifting up the poor and humble. Five times in the New Testament the phrase “*Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted*” is used, reminding us how badly we need to hear it: God despises our pride but loves our humility.

These are not things that only Mary is experiencing: she is reflecting on the fact that God has always done those things and will always do them. Her song celebrates past, present, and future; it touches on God’s covenant promises that He keeps. These are not just ways that God acted in Biblical days – this is how He still works in people’s lives. That should give us pause as we think about ourselves:

are we ones who strive to be proud and mighty, setting ourselves up as VIPs in high places? Or are we among the humble, His people who fear Him? Jesus' teaching in Luke 7:20-26 reflects these same thoughts of His mother's: "*Blessed are you who are poor, who are hungry, who weep now... Woe to you who are rich, who are full now.*" I don't think the answer is that if you have a lot of money, you are automatically doomed unless you give it away and become poor (though Jesus did tell the rich, young ruler that that was exactly what he needed to do to break the idolatry in his life). And conversely, just because you are poor does not mean that you are pleasing God. It's much more about our attitudes, our obedience, and our value system. The world values the strong, self-reliant, and "important" people, and looks down on the small, unimportant people. God loves all kinds of people, so He honors those who are humble and faithful no matter how little they matter to the world. God can use the wealthy, but the Scriptures are full of rebukes and reminders for the rich to use their wealth to accomplish kingdom purposes, and to rely on God Himself, not their money or their worldly power, for fulfillment.

One thing we can take away from Mary's story (remember I said that she was probably 13 or 14 yrs. old) is that we should value our children and our teenagers greatly. We don't just say that kids are the "church of the future," they're part of the church now. We should take teaching and discipling them very seriously, they are capable of great obedience and spiritual depth. And, with verse, 50, we always need to remember that the faith is to be passed on to each new generation.

Conclusion

You've probably heard the Christmas song, "Mary, Did You Know?" that asks a bunch of questions that draw out the tension of a human mother raising a divine Son. A very similar group of questions was written by Max Lucado in a book I read back in the late 80s, *God Came Near*. He has a chapter called "25 Questions for Mary," I'll read just a few of them:³

Did the thought ever occur to you that the God to whom you were praying was asleep under your own roof?

Did he ever have to ask a question about Scripture?

What did he and his cousin John talk about as kids?

When he saw a lamb being led to slaughter, did he act differently?

How did he act at funerals?

What was it like watching him pray?

Did you ever feel awkward teaching him how he created the world?

Thinking about Mary's life ahead, she would watch her son grow up and would have to figure out how this God-man thing worked. Before the theologians of the world tried to reconcile and explain this seeming paradox that there was a being who was fully 100% God and fully 100% man, Mary watched that person in the flesh. She watched Him grow up, never saying an unkind word or deceiving anyone as children often do. When they lost Him at the temple, she had questions. When Jesus said that His mother and brothers were those who did His will, she was probably hurt and wondered how He could be so blunt. When He was arrested, beaten, and hung on a cross to death, her soul was pierced with grief. The last time Mary is mentioned in the Bible is in Acts 1:14 – she was in the Upper Room with the disciples right before the events of Pentecost. She believed all the way through, and was among those who helped start the early church!

One of the verses of the song "O Little Town of Bethlehem" says: "O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today." Have you ever stopped and thought about that line? Is that right? Are we supposed to ask Jesus to be born in us? We're

³ Max Lucado, *God Came Near* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 1987), pp. 43-44.

going to be pregnant like Mary with God's Son? No. Christ is not to be born in our wombs, but in our hearts.⁴ And it's not because we can make it happen in our own strength – it's because, like Mary, God chooses us to be recipients of His grace. God fills us with the Holy Spirit and blesses us with the gift of His Son in our lives, in our hearts. Then we can rejoice with Mary: *"He has done great things for me, holy is His name!"* Are we as blessed as Mary? Consider these two verses from the first and the last books of the NT:

Matthew 25:34 – *"Come, you who are **blessed** by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."*

Revelation 20:6a – *"**Blessed** and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power."*

We receive great blessings from God when we are brought into His kingdom, when He includes us in His eternal family. Jesus' death on the cross took the punishment of our sin and brought us forgiveness that reconciled us to God the Father. Jesus gives all who believe in Him abundant life now and eternal life when we leave this earth.

You know, in the midst of all of this talk of Mary and Elizabeth rejoicing, I realize that some of you may be feeling some disconnect. Maybe you don't feel like rejoicing this Christmas or that most years Christmas is not a great season for you. For all of the lights and festivities, all the songs swirling around us that tell us "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year" and "Have a Holly, Jolly Christmas," maybe you don't feel happy, jolly, or that it's a wonderful life. You don't feel like wishing anyone a merry anything. Maybe there are things happening in your life - unemployment, sickness or death in your family, a troubled marriage or a wayward child – that make you unable to share the "smiles on every face" of Christmas. There are all of these end-of-the-year articles and shows coming out, "The Year in Review", and you're thinking, "Who wants to read those or watch those? Usually, it's really fun to look at what happened in the world, but this year, 2020? Don't remind me, I don't really want to relive it all, let's just get to 2021 fast, OK?"

If that's you and you're having a hard time rejoicing like Elizabeth and Mary this Christmas, I don't want to urge you to fake happiness, to pretend and put on a plastic smile. But I do want you to remind yourself of one thing: no matter how you feel, remember whose you are. Remember the hope of the Gospel, that God cares for you. Yes, God cares for all of His people and is working all over the world, but He loves you. In the midst of your brokenness and your tears, may God shine a light of hope into your soul. Even if you stay sad and find it hard to rejoice, at least preach the Gospel to yourself so you remember that we have the hope that stirred Mary and Elizabeth and the angels and the early church to praise. God sent His Son to His people to take away their sins. He reached out to you and me, when we were dead in our transgressions and sins, and brought us into the light of His glorious salvation. *"He has done great things and holy is His name."*
Amen.

Benediction

Colossians 1:11-14

"May you be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

⁴ Suggested from Tim Keller, *Hidden Christmas* (New York: Viking, 2016), pp. 88-89.