

The Mighty Gift of Praise
Dr. Patricia L. Hunter
Seattle First Baptist Church
December 21, 2015

Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is God's name.

God's mercy is for those who fear God,
from generation to generation.

God has shown strength with God's arm;

God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

God has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

God has helped God's servant Israel,
in remembrance of God's mercy,
according to the promise God made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

If you want to hear a beautiful musical interpretation of these word then grab a bite to eat and come back at 1 pm for the Sanctuary Choir and orchestra concert of the Magnificat. It was beautifully presented last night and I thank you so much for your gifts and your dedication.

Today's Advent theme is love. While I will focus most of this message on the Magnificat and the birth of Jesus, for me John 3:16 addresses both themes perfectly--for God so loved the world, that God gave God's only son that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life. God so loved what? ***the world--***, not just a few people, not just the faithful, not just the kind and generous, or just the beautiful people, but everybody. God so loved the world that God gave Godself, so that all can walk in newness of life and have eternal life. When we love, we freely give. Not out of a sense of obligation or coercion, but we give joyfully.

The Magnificat is known as Mary's song or Mary's song of praise. Mary was excited and filled with joy about what God was doing in her life. Mary composed this song of praise while visiting her kinswoman Elizabeth. Both were un-expectantly pregnant. Elizabeth was the post menopausal wife of the temple priest Zechariah, who had given up on her dream of being a mother. Elizabeth, in her old age, bore a son who was the forerunner of Jesus and known in scripture as John the Baptist. And, Mary a teenager was just starting her life when she became pregnant before she was married.

Both women's situations were ripe for rumor and gossip all over town. Elizabeth was old when she got pregnant, but at least she was married. Mary, on the other hand, had to explain that the child she was carrying was not conceive in the usual way, but by a divine act of God. Good thing there were some angels around to back up her story. Otherwise, I'm not too sure that story of being overshadowed by the Holy Spirit would have flown with her family or her fiancé.

In the midst of what was surely a challenging, anxiety producing situation, Mary sings a song of praise. Instead of cursing God for messing up her vision for her life, she thanked God for using her in a way she didn't expect nor fully understand. Mary trusted that God's plan was even better than her plan.

If only we could react with the same outpouring of praise as Mary when life doesn't go the way we've scripted it. If we didn't get married by the date we marked in the calendar, we have an attitude about it. If our career didn't take the path we crafted, we are resentful. If we didn't have the children we wanted, we are forever mournful. If we have to live with an illness or manage a condition we blame God. If we can't sing the solo we want in church, we threaten to stop singing in the choir. If we can't chair the commission or ministry we want, we stop coming to church.

But what if, we have an attitude of praise when we encounter challenges and disappointments and proclaim, my soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior? How would life be different for us if at the first sign of trouble instead of saying **why me**, we said, God I don't know what you are doing, but I'm going to praise you anyhow? Rev. Aaron Williams, pastor of Mount Zion, says we have to trust God's heart even when we can't see God's hand.

For if God closes a door of opportunity, there is a window of possibility open somewhere! We just have to look for it. Too often fear and grief prevent us from seeing the open window.

Yesterday, I was traveling back to Seattle from working in NYC all week. Our plane was delayed and the woman sitting next to me had a tight connection to her flight to Anchorage. Because of head winds and other delays, it was evident by the time we

landed and deplaned she was going to miss her connecting flight. But instead of her being angry, resentful, and anxious, she said, "***Oh well I will just take the next available flight and go get a manicure while I wait.***" That is living life with the glass half full.

Finally, Mary praised God for God's favor and God's justice and compassion. Mary rejoiced that God choose her--a working class, unmarried, unlettered, woman to bring the Son of the Most High God into the world. No one thought God would send the Messiah in such an ordinary, no frills way! So, if God used a young unmarried woman to turn the world upside down, God has a purpose and a plan for our lives too.

Mary rejoiced that God lifts up the lowly and downtrodden and brings down the mighty who abuse their position and think they are better than anyone else. Mary rejoiced that God's favor resides with the oppressed, the marginalized, and the hungry. Mary's song reassures us that God feels the hearts of those who struggle and God holds true to God's promise of deliverance.

Yes, God so loved the world that God came in a quiet ordinary way--making the ordinary birth of a baby boy into something extraordinary. So as we move towards the big celebration of Christmas, remember God's favor is upon you, God's love surrounds you;

And praise God for what God has done in your past,
Praise God for what God is doing right now,
And praise God for what God will do in your future. Amen.

If you are here this morning and have been moved by this worship experience, and would like to join this marvelous church community of SFBC or reaffirm your own walk in faith we invite you to come forward as we sing our closing hymn, #117 Lift Up Your Heads, O Mighty Gates. We want to celebrate with you.