

Luke 1:39-55

Magnificat

Everyone is named after someone, or some thing. Even those who try to invent unique names fall upon names that have some kind of meaning for them. I had always been under the impression, somehow, that the name, "Mary," was akin to an ancient Hebrew word for "mother," which is not an altogether unreasonable impression to have.

It turns out not to be true, though, and there are some other possibilities to consider. If it has an Egyptian root, then it may mean, "beloved." Since the Hebrews had spent hundreds of years in Egypt, it is also not altogether unreasonable to suggest an Egyptian etymology.

But since the Mary in question is not Egyptian, an hebraic explanation of the meaning of the name might also apply. Quite clearly, Mary the wife of Joseph and mother of Jesus, who is Judean by birth, is named after Miriam, the sister of Moses, who stood by and watched to see what would happen to the brother who had been placed in a basket on the Nile river.

The name may mean "bitter," and refers to the hard times into which this girl was born, ironically in Egypt, and can also mean "rebellious," to refer perhaps, to the rebellion in which she took part, that of defying the Pharaoh's order to kill the male infants.

In the same way that Jewish parents would sometimes name their daughters after Miriam (there are other Mary's in the New Testament, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Clopas, and the sister of Martha), Christian parents have for quite some time been naming their daughters after Mary the mother of Jesus.

Annunciation

The story is that God sent the angel Gabriel to pluck this young Jewish girl out of obscurity by telling her that she would miraculously conceive and give birth to a son who would be the Messiah, the Son of the Most High, and would save his people and reign over the house of Jacob forever.

She is said to have wondered how this could happen, and was directed by Gabriel to her relative down in Judea who's name was Elizabeth, a little further along in her pregnancy, but also the recipient of a miracle, because she had conceived in her old age. Mary accepted her assignment and the angel left her alone.

The Visit

Next we are told that Mary went down to Judea, I am sure not by herself, for she was living in Galilee, to visit with Elizabeth. When she arrived, the baby leapt in Elizabeth's womb, I'm assuming that means he started kicking, and to his mother it meant something very

important was happening, that she was being visited by the Mother of the Lord.

“Blessed are you among women,” she exclaimed, “blessed is the one who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished.” One must not forget that during this time, Elizabeth’s husband Zechariah was unable to speak because he had failed to believe it when the angel came to foretell the birth of their son, who would be John the Baptist, of course. Blessed are those who believe. Happy are the ones who have faith. It is a point worth remembering.

### The Magnificat

Then comes the Song of Mary, otherwise known as the Magnificat, because of the way it begins. “My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” In this set of lyrics the meaning of Christ’s birth is sung.

There is an amazement at the humble beginnings of the messiah, that Jesus was not born among the wealthy elites, the governing class; that there had been 1,000 years to diffuse the royalty in his bloodlines and make him a commoner like most everyone else including you and me.

It gets very interesting as the Song of Mary warms up to the idea of the great reversal. It is like when Paul speaks of Christ crucified in 1 Corinthians; God choosing the foolish things of the world to shame the

wise, the weak things of the world to shame the strong, the things that are not to bring to nothing the things that are.

Or when Jesus says, “If you seek your life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life on purpose for me and for the gospel, then you will find it,” or, “the last shall be first, and the first last.”

Mary’s song hits the same theme:

“God has done great deeds; scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts; brought down rulers from their thrones, but lifted up the humble, filled the hungry with good things but sent the rich away empty;” and helped Israel, of all the peoples on Earth, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants.

According to Luke, that is what the Annunciation and Birth of Jesus meant to Mary. And on this 23rd day of December, 2018 years after at least the traditional dating of these events, we too have the opportunity to ponder its meaning, like when we ponder the meaning of the names we carry with us and name our children with.

### The Meaning of Christmas

Of course, it is tempting to go along with the secular mood of the season. We love the songs and

decorations and the excitement of giving and receiving gifts. We love Rudolf and George Bailey, and Buddy the Elf and Bing Crosby and White Christmas, and ironically, Scrooge and the Grinch.

We love the lights to light up the nights when here in the northern hemisphere there is more night than day for a few months. Most Christians have by necessity welcomed the secular Christmas story because it is too sweet to resist, and the world has too much that is sour in it.

But let it not be to the extent that we forget to ponder what Mary did, the deeper and larger significance of Christ's birth. Let your pondering wander in the direction of the highest and noblest thoughts the imagination allows, that compel us to live for a better world than the world has ever been, and to hope for better selves than we have ever been.

We have heard spoken the word of Peace on Earth but have never accomplished it. We have heard that God so loved the world that he gave his Son as a sacrifice for it, but have never managed to translate God's love for everyone into the deep conviction that it implies, the precious value of every human being, without exception and without regard for whatever category we have put them in, friend or foe, family or stranger, saint or sinner.

Let the birth of Jesus inspire us to consider the extent to which we are called to love when we are simply told to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The Incarnation, like the Resurrection, which we celebrate later in the spring, are such high ideas that they transcend the power of words to communicate them. It turns out that Christmas and Easter make beggars out of preachers like me, solitary voices on lonely platforms trying to give words to them. We need symphonies with large choirs shouting out the Hallelujah Chorus to cast our thoughts upwards into the heavens to do justice to this birth.

But even the symphonies turn out to be inadequate. It may be enough if we can remember who we are named after, those of us who by faith bear the name of Christ. So let your thoughts go until something leaps in your inner being at the joy and wonder of this magnificent Birth, and the unspeakable love that accompanies it.

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