

Luke 1:46-55 The Magnitude of Grace
December 24, 2023

Here we are on Christmas Eve, free to worship and to celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus, and to give thanks for the gift of salvation that he was born to bring.

We have read and heard from the Gospel of Luke, the Annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel, and the Song of praise called the Magnificat, which is an expression of thanksgiving at the marvel that such a person as she was chosen to be the mother of the Lord.

We have lit the four candles for the four Sundays of Advent, and thought about their meaning; hope and peace, joy and love, which is the theme of the day; not an ordinary love, but the divine love for the world that is the foundation of the redemption of which the birth of Jesus inaugurated.

Try as we might, we don't know how to celebrate it. The decorations we put up, the songs we compose and sing, the gifts we give, the good things we do, they all pale in comparison to the magnitude of grace; not to mention the words the preachers use.

The gospel itself is too great for words, and no matter the time of the year, the words they use fall short of the mark. Even so, there are two times of the year when, if words are your instrument, one feels most

vulnerable; at Easter, when the Resurrection is up for grabs, and here at Christmastime.

It is not really a surprise that the Song of Mary is hymnody, which means that it is music, for music allows people to communicate when words are not sufficient. And it is a kind of poetry. Poetry is human language at it's most powerful; buttressed by rhythm and rhyme, or by measured forms that allow it to create emotional and intellectual responses, and set on wings by the use of metaphor and simile or any other method of speech that allows language to transcend itself, to say more than the words say.

But even the highest of all human speech is powerless before the magnitude of grace, unless the miracle of grace accompanies it.

The song begins; "My soul magnifies the Lord.
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

I think I understand how refracted glass can make small things appear larger, after all, we have microscopes, binoculars, and magnifying glasses - but how does a soul magnify anything? Is she not using a illustration from the world of technology to speak of something infinitely greater, to which her words can only point?

The acknowledgment of God's gracious act elicits a response. The first act of faith is not words, but gratitude, not an ordinary gratitude because of a mutual exchange, but a heartfelt and spontaneous

reaction from the inner depths, of an experience that cannot be accomplished in any way, but is received as a gift.

This is not the kind of gratitude we mean when we are at the check-out line in a store of some kind and the clerk says, “thank you,” for your business, and we say, “thank you,” for whatever it is that we just paid for. There is no equality here. There is nothing we can give to God in exchange for life, and forgiveness, and eternity. God has given, we have received. What expression of praise is high enough for . . . that?

One thinks of the ongoing life of the world . . . The wonder of a new birth (we welcomed Annabelle Pierce to the world this week), the pleasure of a friendship, the grand experiences of nature, of a nourishing meal or a good grade on a test; blessings too great to number.

Or of the struggles of life; we celebrate Christmas in a time of war someplace; aware of suffering on a scale hard to imagine though we have seen the pictures; a time of division and distrust, polarization is what we sometimes call it; a time of fear and anxiety and apprehension, and that doesn't even begin to name the struggles that are personal and varied, too many problems to list . . .

Yet the joy of this birth persists because it was into times just like ours and to people just like us that the Holy Child came. Of course, they didn't have all the trappings of modern industrial life that we do, but they

did have the same joys and pleasures, the same concerns, the same struggles, the effort to be good, to love and be loved, the same tensions, the temptation to believe the worst about others, the same failures.

So we will use the same words we have used for years, and sing the same songs, in the faith that God is revealed in them, not by our speaking, but by God's gracious act of self-revealing. The Magnificat itself is a statement of humble acceptance of God's gracious act. The birth of Jesus itself is the self-revelation of God, God letting God be known, so that people can know God;

We pay attention to the words of the Magnificat:

“The Mighty One has done great things for me;” she says, then proclaims that, “his mercy extends to those who fear Him from generation to generation.” And then she gives illustrations:

“He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts, brought down rulers . . . lifted the humble . . . filled the hungry . . . sent the rich away.” And then the song turns to a consideration about her own people, but one that can be thought of as applying to all people;

“He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever . . .”

It is a wonderful and challenging picture of God's nature and grace. The gospel word comes to us, and

at this time of the year it is in the birth of the Holy Child, and when accepted in humility as did Mary, though it uses mere words like we use every day, it reveals the presence of the creative and life-giving power of God, who comes to forgive and to redeem, to heal and to strengthen, to set free from sin and from all the weaknesses and limitations that bind us.

And what is our response? Or, what should it be? It seems that even words like gratitude and praise pale before the realities to which they point, and are meant to represent.

If there is any value to a human expression of thanksgiving or praise, then before these words come out of our mouths, they must represent what is in our hearts, an acceptance of grace that rises above any words we can use.

It is out of the reality of this acceptance that real faith emerges and turns into words, and then into the pursuit of higher character; integrity, truthfulness, patient endurance, compassion . . . ; and then into the deeds of light; of goodness, righteousness, and love; which is the theme for the day.

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Let it be so for us today.

Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me
blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is on those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm,
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their
hearts,
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.”

And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her home.

The Infancy in Matthew

The Genealogy

The women

A Gentile or two

14+14+13

The Who and the How

The OT and the NT

Begotten of the Holy Spirit

A Savior

1 This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:

2 Abraham was the father of Isaac,

Isaac the father of Jacob,

Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,

3 Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar,

Perez the father of Hezron,

Hezron the father of Ram,

4 Ram the father of Amminadab,

Amminadab the father of Nahshon,

Nahshon the father of Salmon,

5 Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,

Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,

Obed the father of Jesse,

6 and Jesse the father of King David.

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife,

7 Solomon the father of Rehoboam,

Rehoboam the father of Abijah,

Abijah the father of Asa,

8 Asa the father of Jehoshaphat,

Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram,

Jehoram the father of Uzziah,

9 Uzziah the father of Jotham,

Jotham the father of Ahaz,

Ahaz the father of Hezekiah,

10 Hezekiah the father of Manasseh,

Manasseh the father of Amon,

Amon the father of Josiah,

11 and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon.

12 After the exile to Babylon:

Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel,

Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel,

13 Zerubbabel the father of Abihud,

Abihud the father of Eliakim,

Eliakim the father of Azor,

14 Azor the father of Zadok,

Zadok the father of Akim,

Akim the father of Elihud,

15 Elihud the father of Eleazar,

Eleazar the father of Matthan,

Matthan the father of Jacob,

16 and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.

17 Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about[: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

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