Bul 3 Sunday December 9, 1973

"MARY AND HER SONG" Luke 1:26-30, 46-55

That Mary was really something! According to the Gospel of Luke, when the Angel Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you,"and in effect told her that she had been chosen by God for a special purpose, she replied, and I paraphrase, "Wait a minute, I want to know all of what this means before I get too involved."

It shows, of course, a great deal of astuteness in Mary. No doubt she had learned through experience that "there is no such thing as a free lunch." Or maybe she didn't want to get her expectations too high. Perhaps Mary wanted no more disappointments; so, no more expectations. The angel Gabriel brought her good news and she was deeply troubled by it.

That is not unusual though. As a matter of fact, often times we too are troubled or a little afraid of what's supposed to be good news for us. Someone says, "Hey, I've got a great opportunity for you." We hear it and we're likely to say, "Wait a minute, what's the catch?"

Mary, however, though afraid and not quite sure of what was expected of her, did accept the challenge given to her after the angel explained more of what was going to happen and what it would mean.

Furthermore there would be nine months of preparation and adjustment. She was not expected to deliver immediately. As the time passed, she would become more and more aware of what the birth of the baby would mean for the world. And so it is that many good things that happen need a time of preparation, a time to grow and mature. We too often need a period of preparation for a job we're going to accomplish.

In addition, Mary was ready to accept what God wanted her to do when she was assured that it was to be good news for the whole world. It was much bigger than Mary. God was giving to her the responsibility for breaking the log jam of indifference so things could happen downstream beyond her.

And as God promised, as Mary's pregancy progressed, she became more and more aware of just what kind of good news for the world the birth of her baby would be.

That Mary became more fully aware of what the birth of her son Jesus was to mean for the world is shown in the fact that when a few months pregnant, she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was also pregnant. Elizabeth's baby was also to have a special role as John the Baptist.

It was while visiting Elizabeth that Mary spoke of what God had done and is doing and what the birth of her son, Jesus was to mean for the world. The words she spoke have since come to be known as the "Magnificat." They are so called because Mary began her statement or song with the phrase -- "My Soul magnifies the Lord!"

The words of Mary's Song have been set to music and tonight you will hear them sung by our choir with the music being written by Johann Sebastian Bach.

The words of Mary are both a confession of her faith and prophetic. They are words of comfort and words of judgement and within them we find much of the meaning of Advent and Christmas.

The first part of Mary's Song is an exclamation of praise! "My soul magnifies the Lord!" A paraphrase might be, "I am overflowing with praise of my Lord, my soul is full of joy in God my Savior, for he has deigned to notice me , his humble servant."

Following that we see that Mary knows the history of her people and in particular she knows what God has done and continues to do. Listen again to part of her description of what God does --

"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."

Mary's statement of faith is consistent with the record of what God has done in both the Old and New Testament, and with the birth of her son Jesus, God is going to continue his work and expand it.

Mary's words are words we all need to hear again during this Advent and coming Christmas season, for they are what make Christmas something more than just a sentimental journey.

All through the Old Testament, it is made plain that God is on the side of those who suffer misfortune, the orphans, the widows, the homeless, the crippled, those in prison, the poor and those who are victims of social oppression. The fact is that God helps those who cannot help themselves, and he calls upon us to do the same.

This concern appears very early in Hebrew history. In dispensing justice, or lending money, or arranging sacrificial offerings, the poor are to be given preferential treatment. The prophets all through the Old Testament, protest when the privileged take advantage of the underprivileged. Isaiah quotes God as saying, "What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor, says the Lord God of Hosts." And the same theme is repeated over and over again by other Old Testament prophets.

Only when we understand the totality and depth of God's concern for the poor and the suffering, the oppressed, the misfortunate, can we appreciate the Magnificat and the reversal which it describes as God bringing about.

Later when Jesus began his public ministry, he picked up the theme of the Magnificat and the Old Testament prophets. ~~Listen to his own words in Luke 4:18-19.~~ After he had been baptized and was certain of his vocation as God's Messiah, he described his ministry in this way--quoting the prophet Isaiah, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has annointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

And then when Jesus was carrying on his ministry, he summed up much of his message in the sermon on the mount. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

Mary's song, the Magnificat, the message of the prophets, and the teachings of Jesus coincide. They all speak to the needs of people. They speak of God who is especially on the side of those in greatest need.

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We need to hear the words of Mary's Song in this Advent season because the poor in our time are often mistreated.

In Detroit last year, a 27 year old man went on trial on charges of stealing five boxes of cookies. He had been waiting in jail one year since his arrest, in lieu of $10,000 bond. No matter what the sentence--even if he is freed--he has already spent a full year of his life in confinement for stealing cookies. Justice is already too late for him.

Local officials, when the case was brought to their attention, blamed the delay on overcrowded dockets and undermanned courtrooms. But those were not the real causes; the real cause was the man's poverty. An affluent thief would not have spent a day in detention. Unfortunately it's not an isolated case.

Studies show that contrary to popular belief, we are not "soft" on criminals as a class. We are soft on those with money, connections, shrewd lawyers and political influence. But we are unconscionably hard on the poorest, the dumbest, the clumiest and often the least culpable.

Or take another kind of problem. Sometime ago, the magazine U.S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT, published an economic survey blasting the whole mythology of taxation. The magazine pointed out that the poor get the dirty end of the stick.

When total taxes -- federal, state, city, social security, sales, property, and all the hidden taxes are taken into consideration, it turns out that poverty-line families making $3,000 a year or less, pay 34% of their total earnings in taxes of one kind or another.

Only slightly better off were the struggling families in the $5000 to $7000 a year bracket, who pay 33% or about $1980 a year out of their meager incomes.

People in the $15,000 to $25,000 a year and those over $25,000 pay only about 28% of their income in total taxes. The point the magazine was making is that our present tax structure is inequitable toward the poor, not the rich. I can imagine what some of the Biblical prophets would've had to say about this.

And yet unfortunately what the bulk of society really wants is for unpleasant people to go away and not bother anybody. Unpleasant people are the poor, those on welfare, the convicted, the mentally ill, the old and the troublesome young.

But listen, the song of Mary, the Magnificat, like the Old Testament, and like Jesus, is telling us in contemporary terms to stop congratulating ourselves on our Gross National Product, and to start reflecting on our gross attitudes toward the disinherited, the feeble, the troubled and the torn. They won't go away and God is with them. The contribution of the Magnificat comes from exposing the false myths of the powerful, not from trying to straighten out the thinking of the poor.

It is especially noteworthy that the words of the Magnificat come from the lips of Mary, a woman. We need to pay attention to that too. Throughout Christian history, Mary has always had a special attraction for the poor and the suffering. In fact, historians have pointed out that we find women leaders and female imagery frequently among the religions of the oppressed more than we do among the religions of the privileged.

Liberty itself is often portrayed as a woman. Our own statue of Liberty is an outstanding example. It is the goddesses and prophetesses, the League of Women Voters, and woman like Mary who can make life difficult for the religiously or politically sanctified establishments in any age.

So it is that Mary's Advent and Christmas song, The Magnificat contains a revolutionary message. According to it, God is always turning things upside down. He is putting down the mighty from their seats and exalting those of low degree.

These are words we do not always want to hear. We would rather hear words that appeal to our preferences and prejudices. But that is not what Mary, Jesus, and the Bible do. They give us hard truths and a difficult path to follow. They call upon our highest qualities not our basest instincts. They do not tell us what we want to hear, but what we ought to hear.

Indeed, this is the difference between a false Messiah and the true one. A false Messiah, like any false leader

or cheap politician, caters to and inflames the fears, hates, angers and resentments of his people and drives them to destruction rather than to salvation, or self-realization.

On the other hand, Jesus, the true Messiah, even taken on a worldy plane, often rebukes us, shows us our errors, makes us uncomfortable, yet makes us want to be better, not stronger or richer, and asks us to make sacrifices for the common good and for the good of our own souls.

Yet what I am afraid that many of us are often looking for in this Advent and Christmas season is not the true Messiah, but a false one, a person who will give oversimplified answers, who will justify our ways, and will castigate our enemies, who will vindicate our selfishness as a way of life and make us comfortable within our prejudices and preconceptions. We want someone who will reconcile the irreconcilable, moralize the immoral, rationalize the unreasonable and promise us a society where we can continue to be as narrow and envious and short-sighted as we would like to be without suffering the consequences. But the ones who would make such promises are false prophets and false leaders, and they come equally from the left, right, center and below.

But the true prophets, from the Old Testament on, through Mary and Jesus, do not always say comfortable things to us. They know that the trouble isn't with our enemies, or with the poor or the oppressed, but with ourselves. They demand that we shed our old skin and become new people.

Like Mary, they tell us about a God and his Son whose mercy is on those who fear him; who scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts, who puts down the mighty from their thrones and exalts those of low degree, who fills the hungry with good things and the rich he sends empty away. Amen.