

Sunday December 24, 2023
Lesson 4: A Song of Justice
Scripture: Luke 1:46-55

Context:

We continue our new winter curriculum, “God Abides,” focusing on how the Holy Spirit reminds us of God’s constant presence with humanity. The first unit is titled “Transforming Spirit,” with lessons on the gospel of Luke in the story of Jesus’ birth tying into the season of Advent. This week’s lesson focuses on a piece called Mary’s Magnificat where Mary ushers in words of joy and thanksgiving at carrying Jesus in her womb. The purpose of today’s lesson will be to learn ways to sing our songs of justice in light of God’s acts of salvation and liberation.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve, we come to one of the most famous speeches/songs given by a woman in the Bible. What has been termed by the church and musicians as Mary’s Magnificat is a piece focusing on what God is doing in the birth of a Savior and how God intervenes in the salvation history of the world. This third and largest unit of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth is not just an autobiographical account of what God is doing in Mary’s life as it also models what God will do for the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed.¹ This song will become a pronouncement to the world and is anything but the musings of a young, meek woman.

The song has several important themes and even references previous allusions of God’s intervention in the world. The song draws heavily on and is patterned after the song of Hannah (1Sam. 2:1-10), who was also the recipient of a miraculous birth to bring a new prophet.² Throughout the song, there are other Old Testament allusions such as the focus on the children of Abraham being promised a future and those in exile returning home. It is a song where tradition comes with a punch for what will be done in the present and the future.

Most scholars note there are two unusual features deserving special attention from the readers. First, God is praised in terms of what he has done, using past tense verbs and no future verbs.³ The why comes from the particular use of the Greek language by which the tense expresses what is timelessly true: past, present, and future without differentiation.⁴ This use of tense is a bold assurance of certainty of God acting again, specifically when it comes to the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed.

The second feature to elicit attention are verses 52 through 53 where the lowly are raised and the lofty are brought low. This is the author giving us a glimpse of Jesus’ ministry: he will speak on behalf of the oppressed and poor and God will have final judgment over who has power

¹ Craddock, Fred B. “Luke.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 29.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. 30.

⁴ Ibid.

and control.⁵ God will begin a pattern of reversing roles and pointing to truths which will turn the world upside down. And it all begins with a young maiden named Mary as she sings a song to express what is taking place within her and around her.

Application

For Christmas one year I received an ornament of Mary and baby Jesus, or as others call them, Madonna and child. The ornament is a little bell with Mary dressed in the traditional white and blue, white representing purity and the blue a shade to represent the cosmic nature of God (the sky is blue) as well as the traditional Byzantine color for royalty. She holds the baby Jesus and both are adorned with a discus, the round shape for a halo used in art to depict being anointed as divine or holy. It's a beautiful ornament and fits in with the traditional Christmas ornaments we like to see on our lovely green trees.

Yet when I read the Magnificat, the whole image I have of Mary changes. In the text, we are met with a young woman perhaps in worn out clothes and no discus proclaiming a song where God comes in judgment and acts on the side of the poor, the oppressed, and the overlooked. And God is there for a giant role reversal by which the rich become humbled, and the poor are lifted. It is a scene where the heavens are turned upside down and things appear quite revolutionary, upsetting our nice, neat world. This song does not proclaim Kumbaya and acts a stark reminder to all those settled of how God comes into our world not to make us comfortable or complacent, but to challenge us and turn our world upside down.

Often when we think of the word "salvation," we have several images which come to our mind. We think of the cross and of Jesus giving his life as an atonement for sin. In the South, there's always questions around "who is saved" and who is not, with a focus on trying to find the magic formula or words to ensure eternity is present on our horizon. If you ask one group of people, you get might ten different answers about what it means to be saved or liberated from whatever brings us down in this life.

The word salvation comes from the Latin word, *salud*, which means health. To be made whole is the goal of every person I know. When we are concerned with our health, we go to the doctor whenever we are sick. Why? We want to find the ways to get better so we can have the freedom to do what we want and to provide for ourselves and those we love.

When I come to this passage, I am humbly struck by how salvation does not lie in my hands, or in the hands of even those who think they know everything and have the certificate to prove it. Salvation comes from Jesus, the one who comes to make people whole, and it is he who does the liberating and the redeeming. It is Jesus who comes to bring salvation and my role is to celebrate it, proclaiming of how he is the one who holds all the answers and all the liberation for those who seek it.

Yet this gift of salvation also invites me to ask the question of what it means for others to be made whole as well, which gets to the point of Mary's song for justice for all. God is not on the side of those who are content with the status quo or catering to the rich or the powerful. God is for speaking on behalf of those who are poor, oppressed, or downtrodden. We are invited to ask the question to whom does our society cast to the side or margins, and then imagine Jesus looking at us with the question of how we will join in his work of making everyone whole.

The issue of justice, or what is fair, is one we are invited to ponder, and occasionally speak up on in our walk with Jesus. I am not sure I understood the idea of fully speaking up for

⁵ Ibid.

others until my youngest nephew Winn learned to talk. For Winn, being fair and just is to come forward in every daily interaction. For example, if Winn sees he is receiving something like a treat, he makes sure to remind you his brother Cue receives one as well. When Winn has me read a story to him, his brother should have the attention as well. And boy, will he let you know how he feels about until all are treated equally with love and attention if you ignore his little voice crying out.

For all of us in the Christian tradition, we are invited to think about and proclaim what is fair and just. There are different questions for the roles we sit in as all of us are given different daily questions. As supervisors, are we advocating for all employees, or just the ones who remind us of ourselves or we like? For family members, are we responding to those in equal measure, or are we picking our favorites and neglecting others? When it comes to how we see justice; does it just apply to people who look and think like us, or do we ask the question of what does it mean to make all people whole?

In the season of Advent, we are reminded of how God is on the side of those in need and God's salvation and liberation is for all. Mary's song is not about achieving piety or holiness on one's merit; it is about God turning the world upside down. God is the one who comes to grant salvation and God will not rest until we seek his justice for all.

What does the word salvation mean to you? Why do you think Mary's song should give us pause for reflection on who is oppressed, poor, or downtrodden? What roles does justice play in your Christian walk? Why do you think fairness is so important in our personal lives? Who are people who proclaim and live into advocating's God's justice in our world?

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