

Advent Worship Series
Sermon Title: “We Are Blessed”
20 December 2015: Advent 4
FUMC—Arlington, TX 76011
Preaching Text: Luke 1:39-55

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“Every blessing ignored becomes a curse”
—(Paulo Coelho—The Alchemist).
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Hear the day’s lesson:

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

46 And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever” (Luke 1:39-55).

Mary’s song, *The Magnificat*, is one of three canticles in Luke’s birth account about Jesus (see also *The Benedictus* [1:67-79] & *Nunc Dimittis*, [2:28-32]). These canticles’ names come from the hymns’ first Latin line. Mary sings praises to God for herself—but also for how God provides for the upright via both past and future. Perceptive as to what God is doing, Mary is joyful. She speaks for both herself and the community—the people of God across time. God is worthy of praise because God cares for and acts for us.

This is another notable case of Jewish/Christian storytelling. Mary is an example of a modest, faithful believer. Mary stands out because people in the first-century regularly consigned women to second-class status. Other noteworthy Jewish women are in the Hebrew Scriptures (see: Miriam in Ex 15:21; Hannah in 1 Sam 2:1-10; Deborah in Judges 5, for examples). Luke’s infancy stories summon a

jumble of various characters that seem to relish Jesus' arrival. This reveals Jesus' widespread appeal (from iblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Luke/Marys-Hymn-Praise-Magnificat). Two of these “various types of characters” are certainly Mary and Elizabeth. The scene is ridiculous. Not archangels or high priests or mighty sovereigns or even the clergy proclaim the Messiah of Israel. Rather, two unnoticed, expecting folk—one young, underprivileged, and unwed; the other beyond the age to conceive—meet in Judea to rejoice (and perchance offer condolences to the other) about their odd condition of being with child—a leaping baby and blessings all around. They express astonishment and sing songs—two pregnant women. Imagine this peculiar and joy-filled story—fleshy and embodied. It is an earthy tale—like a tavern joke in a way. This surprise is where we derive the word *incarnation*—from the Latin root *carn-*(“flesh”). Note it is also the root word for “carnival” and “carnivore!” Mary and Elizabeth’s actions turn the world upside down. The order of authority is undermined. Mary sings: “The mighty are brought down.” Two outsiders, and pregnant at that, usher in a new future and announce the Messiah.

We all know what “big shots” look like—and yet this story leaves the big shots out of the loop. In the spring of 1969 our principal called us to Truman Road, because we were to see history. Our whole school assembled for three-quarters of a mile on either side of Truman Road. Then it happened: a presidential motorcade. Police cars, police motorcycles, limousines with flags flying, helicopters, the press corps, dignitaries of all kinds—city, county, state, and federal—well you get the idea—all escorted Richard Nixon. No mistake about it: THAT WAS THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES!! I’ll guarantee you one thing—when Mary and Elizabeth passed by no one notice in the any Judean town in the hill country. It would have been as if they were invisible. And yet, two female outsiders escort in a new future announcing Messiah. Mary’s *Magnificat* sings of this revolutionary incarnation that Elizabeth and Mary personify. Truly, Mary sings the *Magnificat* as an odd and subversive tune.

Mary, fully an outsider even in her own unique culture—declares with certainty one of the

most significant far-sighted biblical announcements. The iconic picture is remarkable, even laughable: a young, pregnant virgin offers her voice to sing a hymn for all time *The Magnificat* remains a canticle beckoning us away from our common sense, conventional prospects and beyond our disoriented dreams.

Mary seems shocked as revealed by her song's first words: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." The balance of *The Magnificat* pronounces larger consequences of the world's re-ordering that God initiates: "He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Mary promises God's guaranteed, topsy-turvy future is an already achieved reality. Perhaps we see this in God's choice of Mary to bear the Messiah. Thus Mary both carries the Messiah within her as she embodies the ideal of all people being of equal worth in our world—or better—in God's world. This story leaves "the big shots" out of the loop. So what does this mean to us? Good question.

Edwin Markham may help us understand the shallowness of our "big-shot-itis." Markham took truth as the theme of a poem about a shoe cobbler who dreamed one night that Jesus would come to be his guest. The cobbler dreamed that the next day Jesus was coming to visit him. The dream seemed so real the cobbler got up very early the next morning and hurried to the woods, where he gathered green boughs to decorate his shop for the arrival of so great a Guest. The cobbler waited all morning, but to his disappointment, his shop remained quiet, except for an old man who limped up to the door asking to come in for a few minutes of warmth. While the man was resting, the cobbler noticed that the old fellow's shoes were worn through. Touched, the cobbler took a new pair from his shelves and saw to it that the stranger was wearing them as he went on his way. Throughout the afternoon the cobbler waited, but his only visitor was an elderly woman. He had seen her struggling under a heavy load of firewood, and he invited her, too, into

his shop to rest. Then he discovered that for two days she had had nothing to eat; he saw to it she had a nourishing meal before she went on her way.

As night began to fall, the cobbler heard a child crying outside his door. The child was lost and afraid. The cobbler went out, soothed the youngster's tears, and with the little hand in his, took the child home. When he returned, the cobbler was sad. He was convinced that while he had been away he had missed the visit of his Lord. Now he lived through the moments as he had imagined them: the knock, the latch lifted, the radiant face, the offered cup. He would have kissed the hands where the nails had been, washed the feet where the spikes had entered. Then the Lord would have sat and talked to him. In his anguish, the cobbler cried out, "Why is it, Lord, Your feet delay. Have you forgotten that this was the day?"

Then, soft in the silence a voice he heard: "Lift up your heart for I kept My word. Three times I came to your friendly door; Three times My shadow was on your floor. I was the man with the bruised feet. I was the woman you gave food to eat, I was the child on the homeless street" (from Don Shelby: "Holy Hospitality"—23 December 1984, FUMC Santa Monica CA). You just never know. You just never know. Amen.