Sermon on Luke 1:39-56
Midweek Advent I
St. Matthew's Ev. Lutheran Church
Oconomowoc, WI

Sing a Song of God's Greatness

+ For Mary + For the Many

JESUS!

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This evening, our Advent Season begins in a wonderful way - with a song. It isn't your average top-40 song: picked today, panned tomorrow. It isn't a national anthem, because it's a song that has likely been sung by people from every nation under heaven. It isn't an advertisement ditty on the radio, because what this evening's song sings about is far too precious to be purchased. This evening, we are treated to a Christian "classic." This golden oldie has been sung ever since that day when a young virgin named Mary came face to face with the angel Gabriel, and the eternal Word, the Son of God, wrapped himself in our flesh, blood, and bones in his mother Mary's belly. The song we hear this evening is the Song of Mary, the *Magnificat*.

As children, we learned the song: *"If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands."* That song describes how Mary was feeling at the moment. She was filled with the Spirit. She was favored in a way that no other woman on earth ever has been nor ever will be again. She was happy, and she knew why. Fortunately, Mary did much more than clap her hands! Instead, she sang a song of God's greatness. This great song of praise was recorded for us, not by Sony, but by St. Luke. It is all there for us in the first chapter of Luke so that we can sing along with Mary some 2,000 years later. This evening, with the Virgin Mary serving as our accompanist, we too will **SING A SONG OF GOD'S GREATNESS - GREATNESS 1) FOR MARY; GREATNESS 2) FOR THE MANY.**

Power That Does Great Things for Mary

Let's refresh our memories a bit about Mary's background and the background of her song. Remember back to your Sunday School days. Mary was from the family tree of the great King David. She was royalty - descended from a ruling line that hadn't ruled a thing for nearly 600 years. David's family had fallen on hard times: no longer powerful and mighty, but poor and lowly. And for all the stunning pictures of Mary that history's greatest artists have painted, she might not have been beautiful at all. One thing is certain: she didn't wear the jewel-encrusted velvet gowns and crowns in which she has been painted throughout the centuries. Her hometown was not Jerusalem, the great city, but an obscure village of a few hundred people—

Nazareth, in a backwater province of Galilee. What we do know about Mary is that she was a virgin engaged to a pious man named Joseph—and she just happened to dearly love the Word of God, believing it without question.

Then, suddenly, one day, without expecting it, Mary's life changed forever. The Lord's angel Gabriel visited her with some stunning news: she was highly favored by her God. The Lord was with her. Out of pure grace, he would do wonderful things FOR Mary and THROUGH Mary. She was going to have a child, and the name had already been picked out: Jesus.

This was stunning news, but the news didn't add up: Mary was a virgin, and she knew where babies came from! How could this be? Gabriel pointed Mary away from her body, away from her virginity, away from the laws of biology, away from her knowledge of the birds and the bees, and pointed her to the work of God the Holy Spirit. The child would be conceived, not by a man, but by the Holy Spirit–a bedrock truth of the Christian faith. The Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who had created life in the very beginning, was now busy creating life in Mary's uterus. As a sign to bolster her faith in this miracle, Gabriel told Mary about another miracle that was taking place: Mary's relative Elizabeth, sterile and way past her prime, was already in the sixth month of her pregnancy. And right here we see a third miracle of the Holy Spirit: Mary received all of these words in humble faith! "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your Word to me be fulfilled" (1:38).

Why was it that she, of all women on earth, would be the one to bring the eternal Son of God into time and space, into this world? Why? Plain and simple: God had been *gracious* to her. Her body and soul, mind and emotions had all been touched by the great goodness of her God. How should she respond to grace like that? Simple. She sings: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant" (1:47-48a). *She sings a wonderful truth to us: the God of all greatness is also the God of all salvation.* God uses his greatness to save humble people, "little" people like Mary, in absolute gentleness. The Lord had done great things for Mary–and she sang a song of praise to her Son, her Savior!

Power That Does Great Things for the Many

It is easy this evening to see the humility and poverty of Mary as the main storyline of Luke 1. Many of us have already unpacked our manger scenes at home with the statue of lowly Mary holding her son in her arms as ox and ass look on in mute wonder. There certainly is something appealing to the story about the poor young woman who was about to become a first-time mother. *The point of this evening's Gospel, however, is not the humility of Mary, but the saving greatness of God shown* ***to the many*** *through the humility of his Son, Jesus.*

And this key truth really counts! A fundamentalist Muslim would choke on that last sentence–*that the greatness of God is shown through humility.* Every time an Islamic extremist commits an act of terror, you can be absolutely certain that you will hear him shout two words, "Allah Akbar"–"God, Allah, is GREAT!" In their minds, they are furthering the greatness of God by forcing the world to submit to God, one bombing, one beheading, one shooting, one stoning at a time. God is GREAT–therefore, why wouldn't he work through violence, through force, through brute strength? A great God needs strong followers–so the Islamist line of reasoning goes.

How differently the one true God works! Look at his humility! He doesn't dazzle us with glory but is born in darkness. He fills the universe with his presence, yet willingly attaches himself to the wall of a young woman's uterus with an umbilical cord. The One who is the eternal Son of the Father was pleased to have an average Joe as a stepfather. He messed his diapers. He sucked his thumb. He slept. He cried. He died. The King of the universe embraced and took upon himself the humility of everyday humanity to save us! "The Mighty One has done great things." The Lord who did great things for Mary is the same Lord who does great things for the many!

And perhaps, for us, the greatest thing we hear about God in Mary's song is that he is pleased to be merciful to the many: 50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

The Lord is merciful. That is not exactly news. We know that his mercies are new to us every morning. We sing in the liturgy, almost every single Sunday, for the Lord *to have mercy upon us*. We hear that word so often that we easily forget this biblical truth: *our need for God's mercy is absolute!* The fact is that none of us is nearly as clever and high and mighty as we would like to think - even on our best day. No one recognized that better than Martin Luther. His life's work is contained in over 100 volumes. He is an absolute giant in the history of the world. His name is found on tens of thousands of churches with millions upon millions of members. Despite his amazing career and his critical importance in history, do you know what his last words were as he lay dying in bed? Wir sind Bettler, hoc est verum. Translation: *We are beggars, this is true*. Luther knew - right along with Mary - that in our relationship with God, we don't bring anything to the table. We are beggars at the table. God brings everything to the table. *He isn't a beggar, but a blesser.*

> We cry; God comforts.
> We get worn down; God renews our strength.
> We hunger; God feeds.
> We suffer; God gives hope.
> We die; yet in Christ we live.
> The Lord is mighty in his mercy for the many!

Consider the other option: If we don't like the Lord's mercy, then know for certain that the Lord's arm that is might in mercy, can also be mighty in judgment! The arm of the Lord governs the universe and holds the galaxies on a leash. That same mighty arm knows how to scatter the proud. The Lord's mighty arm destroyed the wicked world of Noah's day - one crashing tsunami at a time. The Lord's mighty arm scattered the people of Babel by raining down utter confusion upon their building project. The Lord's mighty arm incinerated the immoral cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Then there are the modern-day proud opposers of God. Take the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, for example. He coined the phrase "Gott ist tot" - God is dead. But God is still alive - long after Nietzsche died in an insane asylum. *The God of mercy and might is an absolute master at humbling the proud and mighty and lifting up the humble and lowly!*

Mary's last words are words of great comfort to us: "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful 55 to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors." Here we see our God keeping his saving promise! To Adam and Eve, shaking with fear in their fig leaves, God promised to send a Savior - the seed of the woman - who would crush the devil's head. To Abraham, a man literally without a country, the Lord promised that the whole earth would be blessed through his great descendant. And even though the Children of Israel had their dark days and their love affairs with idols, the Lord still kept his promise to ransom captive Israel. *In Mary, the saving promises of God – that Adam and Abraham, Noah and Nehemiah, Ruth and Rebecca all looked forward to – were taking on our flesh and blood!*

Which is why, no matter what our background, no matter what our doubts or how deep our despair, no matter how real our loneliness or raw our grief, no matter what our problems, predicaments, our hurts and heartbreaks, God has sent his Son, the Savior, for you! He has remembered to be merciful to the many just as he was with Mary.

The Lord promised mighty things, saving things, through the prophets. In the fullness of God's time, roughly 2,000 years ago, Mary was privileged to sing of these promises - all kept. This Advent season, we celebrate these ancient promises - all pointing to that baby born in Bethlehem – all kept. The Lord has done GREAT THINGS for Mary, for the Many, for YOU! And we are filled with joy! Amen.

———————

Prof. Aaron Christie
Mequon, WI