

That's What Christmas is All About

By Reverend Litton Logan

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Scriptures: Luke 1:39--55 (NRSV)

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

Mary's Song of Praise

⁴⁶And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Introduction:

At this time of year, we have TV programs that in some way or the other want to validate certain aspects of the Christmas story through science or history or take it apart as some primitive fiction. So, in response to the absurdities of such things, I want to compare such efforts to the good ole boy and a good ole girl, who went deep into the frozen woods searching for a Christmas tree. After an hour or so of subzero temperatures and a close call with hungry wolves, the girl turned to the guy and said, "Look, I'm chopping down the next fir tree I see. I don't care whether it's decorated or not!"

Sermon:

As many of you know, I struggle to get under a biblical text and to know its cultural context, its origins, and how such things affect its translation or relevance for the original audiences and for us. I am also very, very aware that socio-cultural contexts, historical, and scientific data have their limitations in matters of religious knowledge and knowing.

So, I believe we should never ask historical or scientific questions or questions about the facticity of such texts as we've heard today. I say this because in the ancient world as is the case within a vast majority of people in the world today, there was or is no such thing as the natural world and the supernatural world. Reality runs from dirt to the divine and altered moments of reality such as Mary's, angelic annunciation and her pregnancy, although rare, were and are all a part of one, great continuum of reality. Along this continuum we find and give meaning to our lives. In short, there are no miracles, only wondrous moments in people's life in God.

So, if we modern folks want to get a grip on our text, we should approach it with the heart and imagination of a child and the soul of a poet, because only through an imaginative vision can we know and experience the wonders and truths in our text today and believe you me, there are some wondrous truths in our text.

Lest you think I am selling our text short, I hasten to remind us that in our quest to understand and define ourselves and our worlds, we do so in and through our imaginations. It is in our imaginations that we discern and impose order, understanding, and meaning in response to our questions about ourselves, others, and creation. This is to say that all we call real is actually the product of human imaginations.

In our text, Mary breaks her silence and reveals her joy about her pregnancy in a beautiful song or poem. The words of these scriptures have been set to music in the famous Canticle of Mary. All too frequently, however, we read Mary's song as just a beautiful Christmas poem. We don't usually pause to listen to or read Mary's song beyond our seasonal interests or from within the larger context of Luke's Gospel. Mary's song is actually an outline for the entire Gospel of Luke that highlights Jesus' preordained life and ministry as a culmination of God's loving-loyalty toward all the descendants of Abraham and their mission to bless, not only the world of the Israelites, but also the worlds of others.

Most importantly, Mary's song is a song from her soul; wherein, she speaks of what God is going to do for God's people, people who have become powerless and have lost or cannot maintain their honor standing among others either because they have been victimized by more powerful and ruthless people or by demonic forces. The lowly and the socially disenfranchised will be exalted; the falsely pious and the religious-political-know-it-all's will be brought low; the physically and spiritually starving masses will be filled, and the rich and self-inflated will either be sent away empty, or at best be the last in line and least honored of God's people, when they are ushered in to the great, kingdom banquet.

Such distinctions become evident in Jesus' ministry as he relates to the Sadducees and the Pharisees and in his blessing, healing, honoring the dishonored, and spiritually and physically feeding the poor and marginalized of his day. The poor, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised become spiritually wealthy and powerful. They are blessed and honored throughout Luke's Gospel because they have no illusions of power and thus have open hearts and minds to hear the good news of God's love and remembrance in Jesus' message.

In the end, Mary's child will turn the world upside down when he inaugurates the kingdom of God. This kingdom is beyond all human expectation in regards to kings and kingdoms, but not beyond the imaginations of those who come as little children and live in the power and vision of God's spirit.

Many people question Christmas and wonder if it was God's intention to confront the human condition with a clear understanding of holy living and holy relationship, why didn't God do it in such an overwhelming way as to leave no doubt as to who and what Jesus was and is?¹

I think people who ask such questions obviously still have some very un-reflected upon, childish notions of God - notions that did not mature along with education and life experience. Notions they should have checked out as adults. I also find it amazing that in one of our most

¹ Hick, John H. *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd Ed. Foundations of Philosophy Series, editors, Elizabeth and Monroe Beardsley (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1973), p. 60.

important relationships - our relationship to God - people want cheap, quick, crass childish answers rather than learning the ways of God.

God, in the beginning, chose to share with humankind the power of self-determination to insure that our relationship to God was voluntary, not coerced or extorted. Thus, we have the absolute and inalienable right to choose the good or the bad, and we are free to participate in or not to participate in a conscious relationship with God even while God, our Creator and Sustainer, maintains the very matrix of our existence in which we reject its Sustainer.

In scripture, because of the radical holiness of God, God's divine presence must always be mediated or veiled lest God's presence overwhelms people and intimidates them beyond their freedom. Scripture understands this mediation in such greats of God as Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and finally and most completely in Jesus the Christ. Scripture also implies that God extended the divine self to humanity even when it meant that God eternally divested and restricted some essential and critical aspect of the divine self in the person of Jesus Christ for our benefit.

God in Jesus Christ broke through all modes of human knowing, understandings, and expectations in such a way as to preserve humankind's freedom of self-determination while revealing God's ultimate moral, spiritual, and loving presence at the most propitious time in human history.

I like the way Blaise Pascal (1623-62), the French philosopher, mathematician, and physicist explains it:

It was not then right that He should appear in a manner manifestly divine, and completely capable of convincing all men; but it was also not right that He should come in so hidden a manner that He could not be known by those who should sincerely seek Him. He has willed to make Himself quite recognizable by those; and thus, willing to appear openly to those who seek Him with all their heart, and to be hidden from those who flee from Him with all their heart, he so regulates the knowledge of Himself that he has given signs of Himself, visible to those who seek Him, and not to those who seek Him not. There is enough light for those who only desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary disposition.²

As I understand it, God revealed and reveals the divine self to those that are sensitive to and respond to God's ever present, whispered lure within the human heart and imagination. These people know full well who is it that calls them from behind the veil of this reality. This call and its answer are the felt-knowledge of faith in world that a child knows full well amid all the adult historical and scientific doubts and nonsense surrounding the Christmas story.

In addition, God's action in human time and space always leaves room for the uncompelled responses of faith. Human faith is but one expression of humankind's imagination that facilitates our understanding of the world we live in and allows us to assimilate divine novelty in terms of our previous experiences or interpret ordinary events as God's presence in a special way.³

Therefore, as Pascal indicates, the human soul or mind that desires a relationship to God and seeks to respond to a felt presence in and beyond the universe will be met with the ability to see and experience God's hand at work in the ordinary as well as in the extra ordinary. For instance, in the bible stories of divine intervention in human births such as Abraham and Sara, the mother and father of Judaism; Elkanah and Hannah, the prophet Samuel's parents; Zechariah and Elizabeth, John the Baptist's parents, and Mary and Joseph, we hear not only stories about God's ability to do the impossible by our standards but stories wherein the faithful see and believe that God reaches out to them and extends God's blessings and unique possibilities in a divine-human relationship.

² Pensées, tr. W.F. Trotter (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., and New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., No. 430, p. 118.

³ Hick, John H. Philosophy of Religion, 2nd Ed. Foundations of Philosophy Series, editors, Elizabeth and Monroe Beardsley (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1973), p. 61.

Thus, is Mary's song. Mary's song is her soul-song, proclaiming God's willingness to do whatever is necessary to make God's loving and abiding presence known in the human condition. Mary's song reminds us of God's willingness to do powerful and wonderful things in people's lives regardless of whom they are if they are sensitive and seek God presence and directions. Mary's song tells us that God can and often does take the least of us, the most powerless and marginalized and uses us to bless not only our worlds but the world. Mary sings out loud and clear that nothing is impossible with God, especially for those of faith, who will answer and submit to God's call and claim.

This Sunday let us leave our church, our time of prayer, praise, and proclamation not in awe of a miracle but in the great and marvelous thing God has done for us through Mary's child. It was not and is not a miracle. It is simply God doing what God has always done, loving and reaching out to humanity in the ordinariness of life.

I would implore us today to claim Mary's soul-song as our soul's song and let us go out in this season and all year long proclaiming the good news - God has reached beyond the veil of the holy in Jesus the Christ, Emmanuel, God with Us. And, thus in God with Us we have the assurances of God's eternal love and the power to participate in the kingdom now and yet to be. Be open to divine possibilities in your normal, every-day life regardless of who you are because after all "That's What Christmas is All About!"

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