

Our Child, Our Responsibility

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

12/24/06 (Morning Service)

Luke 1:39-55 (NRSV)

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."

A SEASON OF SONG

We have entered the musical season in earnest. Before we finish with Christmastide, we will have sung every familiar Advent carol and Christmas carol in our hymnal. More than any other season this is the season of singing. We can't make it without our music.

In fact, when we hired Steve to be our music director this past week, we put it in the job description. The Christmas season is not an appropriate time to take vacation. Sorry about that Steve. If we can't sing the songs, it's just not Christmas.

All of us have our favorite songs. Even those of us who are not too good at singing have been known to sing in the shower from time to time. A song is often an expression of who we are and what we believe most deeply.

I often sing country tunes because those songs remind me of my home in the hills. Country songs also tend to tell a story, and I like stories.

What's your story? I bet there's a song that expresses it for you.

The poor also have their songs. In fact some of the most heartfelt and lasting melodies come to us from people for whom life has been a struggle. Through their song they can express their pain and desire.

I think that's why the blues have made such an impact on music. They're real. They tell it like it is. And there is something about telling the story in song that makes us feel better.

Several years ago I heard an interview on the radio. A country musician was talking about his childhood. He came from a very poor family. He lost his whole family at an early age.

The interviewer asked, "So how did you become a singer?" The man said that when he was only five or six years old he would climb a tree where he thought no one could hear him and sing for hours on end ... simply because he "had to."

What he didn't know was that people had started to enjoy his singing and had begun to gather around the tree as he sang. Pretty soon a cousin decided that the boy needed to learn how to play the guitar in order to accompany his singing, and that's how his career in music was launched.

Music changed this man's life. And it all began with a young boy alone in a tree wanting to express the music he found in his heart.

MARY'S SONG

Today the music comes from Mary. Mary had good reason to sing. The longing of her heart and the longings of her people had been heard and answered. The angel, God's messenger brought good news. She was going to have a child.

But it wouldn't be just any child. This child would be the Messiah, the Son of the most high. He would inherit the throne of David, and his reign would never end.

This was a great reason to sing. Not only was God's Messiah coming soon, he was coming by means of this humble woman, Mary.

And so she sang. "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. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed ..."

Mary is called blessed. What does that mean? Does it mean that Mary is a passive recipient of God's grace, an icon to be adored for her silence and obedience? That's how she's portrayed in some circles but not in Luke. Luke's Mary is forceful and assertive ... even at a young age.

PREGNANT PRESIDENTS AND PROPHETS

Scott Johnston, a minister in Atlanta tells a story about a debate in middle school. They were asked to debate whether they expected in their lifetime to see a woman become President of the United States.

The affirmative team argued that the march of history was on their side. Leadership positions in business were going more and more to qualified women. It was only a matter of time before a woman would become President.

The negative team said that while it was permissible for a woman to become President, they doubted that the American people would ever stand for it. They said that women were not “tough enough” and “too emotional.” And one young man said, “And what if she would get pregnant? Can you imagine that, a pregnant president?”

Scott said that the argument ended as a ringing bell sent them scrambling for the hallways. But, the guy’s challenge was still ringing in their ears, “Can you imagine that, a pregnant president?”

Luke wants us to see a world as drawn by pregnant prophets.

The young man thought that the idea of a pregnant President was ludicrous. Just mentioning it was enough to disqualify any woman for the job.

But, is that really true? Maybe a pregnant President might be a good idea. They say that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. Maybe the hand that rocks the cradle really should rule the world!

Who would have higher expectations for our country and our world than a mother to be? Who would be more likely to protect the vulnerable women and children of the world than one who finds herself in such a vulnerable state?

And then there is this argument. God Himself chooses a pregnant woman as the means of salvation for the whole world.

A PROTEST SONG

In Luke, Mary, the pregnant prophet is no shrinking violet. Her song lets us know what she thinks.

Everyone sings in Luke’s gospel. Zechariah sings when he learns that he is going to be a daddy. Mary sings when she hears that she is going to be a mama. The angels sing. Elizabeth sings. Simeon sings.

In Luke, everybody is always singing. But, the songs in Luke are not your ordinary Christmas carol. What is this song that Mary sings so sweetly? It’s a protest song. It’s a song about revolution and social upheaval. Mary sings,

“He has shown strength with his arm; 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’s carol is not all that sweet ... at least for some people. Those who have become rich on the backs of the poor will be taken down a notch even as those of low estate will be lifted up.

In fact, William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, warned his missionaries to India never to read the Magnificat, Mary's song in public. Christians were already suspect under suspicion in that country; they didn't need to add fuel to the fire by reading verses that were so inflammatory.

I would say that they would have to do more than just eliminate public reading of the Magnificat. The whole message of the Bible is inflammatory when rightly understood. The gospel song has the power to change things. It is about liberation and a world where the poor and the captive are given freedom. The gospel song tells us that everyone is of great worth in God's eyes.

For the powerful who want to keep everyone in their place, this is the worst news ever. But, for those who are downtrodden it is the miracle for which they have been praying. Imagine that. God can use a humble woman to bless the world. And maybe God can even use someone like you and me to do the same.

Music like that can make a difference. When we sing Mary's song, like Mary we begin to believe that nothing is impossible with God. Even our seemingly insignificant life might have great significance.

In her singing Mary becomes the first disciple ... a model for us all. She is the very first to hear the announcement that God is with us and the very first to believe.

Martin Luther once said that three miracles occurred at the birth of Christ. God became human, a virgin conceived and Mary believed.

For Luther, the greatest miracle that first Christmas was the last. Mary believed. It was impossible, but she believed. She sang God's song when the world was dark, and through her song the light dawned.

SAVED BY HER SONG

Years ago the English steamer, Stella was wrecked on a rocky coast. Twelve women were put into a lifeboat but the tempestuous sea immediately carried it away. Having no oars, they were at the mercy of the wind and the waves, and they spent a fearful night being tossed about by the raging tempest.

They would have probably been lost had it not been for the spiritual stamina of one of the ladies on board, Margaret Williams. Margaret was well known for her work in sacred music. Calmly she prayed for divine protection. Urging her companions to put their trust in the Lord, she encouraged them by continuously singing hymns of comfort.

Throughout the dark hours her voice rang out across the water. And early the next morning a small craft came searching for survivors. The man at the helm said that he would have missed the women in the fog if he had not heard Miss Williams singing,

"O, rest in the Lord. Wait patiently for Him!"

Steering in the direction of her strong voice, he soon spotted the drifting lifeboat. While many were lost that night, these trusting few were rescued.

If we are to be saved, we too must sing a new song, a song of God's mercy and grace as revealed in Christ Jesus. Today we are encouraged to sing along with Mary. We are challenged to believe that things can be different, that one small child can change the world.

We are challenged to believe that even the weakest member of society has the potential to bear the very presence of God.

A TALE OF TWO BAPTISMS

A Presbyterian minister told about a baptism that occurred at a church he served. It was around Thanksgiving weekend. One of the elders of the church proudly stood with his new grandson as he was baptized.

As is the custom in many churches, whenever a baptism occurred at this church the preacher would routinely ask the congregation, "Who stands with this child?"

At this point grandparents and an assortment of relatives join the parents in holding the baby and presenting the baby for baptism. On this day the front of the sanctuary was filled with family and friends.

After the service was over, and the congregation had left for dinner, the pastor was putting the sanctuary in order when he noticed that one person had remained. He said that she was dressed "Salvation Army style, clutching a black plastic purse." He recognized her as someone who always sat in the back pew, close to the back door. And she seemed at a loss for words.

After an awkward silence, she commented on how lovely the baptism was and then with much emotion she said, "Tina has had a baby and, well, the baby ought to be baptized, shouldn't it?"

The pastor suggested that Tina should come to see him, along with her husband. They could discuss together the possibility.

The woman looked up at the pastor and said, "Tina has no husband. She was confirmed in this congregation and came to the youth group. But, then she got involved with this older boy. And then she got pregnant. She is only eighteen."

Now it was the pastor's turn to be at a loss for words. He mumbled something about needing to bring her request before the Session. When the pastor presented the request to baptize Tina's baby there was more mumbling. How could they be sure that Tina would be faithful to the promises she was making? How could they be sure about anybody's promises?

After thirty minutes of indecisive discussion, the Session finally decided to schedule the baptism for the fourth Sunday of Advent.

When the fourth Sunday of Advent arrived, the church was filled, just as it always was as Christmas approached. They went through the usual service ... lit the four Advent candles and sang "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus."

And then it was time for the baptism. The pastor said, "Will those who are going to be baptized please come forward."

An elder of the church stood and read off a three by five card, "Tina Corey presents her son, James, for baptism."

He awkwardly stared at the card as if he wasn't quite sure who that might be.

Tina got up from where she was seated and came down to the front, holding two month old James in her arms. A blue pacifier was stuck in his mouth, and he was giving it a real workout. The scene was just as awkward as the pastor and the elders knew it would be.

Tina seemed so young, so alone. As she stood there, they could not help but think of another mother and another baby, young, alone, long ago.

And then the pastor came to that appointed part of the service when he asked the usual question, “And who stands with this child?” He looked out at Tina’s mother dressed in her meager way and nodded.

She slowly, awkwardly stood and moved toward her daughter and grandson.

The pastor’s eyes went back to the service book to proceed with the questions to be asked of the parents. It was at this point that he sensed some movement within the congregation. A couple elders stood up. Then the sixth grade Sunday school teacher stood up. Then a new young couple in the church stood up.

And then, much to the pastor’s astonishment, the whole church was standing, moving forward, clustered around the baby and the Madonna. Tina was crying. Her mother was gripping the back of the pew as if she were clutching the railing of a tossing ship.

And little Jimmy as the water touched his forehead, grew peaceful and calm ... as if he could feel this warm embrace. The whole congregation came together that day. It was as if this child was their child. It was as if they were all one family.

SEE WHAT LOVE

In John’s first letter we read, “See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” John also tells us in this first testament of love that we “see” God by loving others.

Salvation first came through the birth of a baby, a little baby boy who turned out to be the very presence of God. And, on account of that baby, we have all become a part of the royal family.

One of my favorite Christmas cards of all time had a picture of a tiny hand reaching out from a manger. It read, “Christmas is love tugging men and women back to God ... with the powerful clasp of a tiny hand reaching from a bed of straw.”

Maybe today you feel all alone.
Maybe you don’t have much family.

Maybe you have lost the family you had.
Maybe your family is far away.

Today, I have good news.
Your family has just gotten larger, and they are coming together!
It will be a grand family reunion.

Today I hear a shuffling in the pews.
Do you hear it? Do you know what it means?
The family, the whole human family is taking their place around the manger.
Strangers are becoming brothers and sisters.

The Word has become flesh, and He dwells among us.
Let's sing the good news with gusto.
Let's sing along with Mary this morning. Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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