

# A Humble Song of Revolution

Fourth Sunday in Advent - December 20, 2020  
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania  
Pastor James Haun

(Worship Aids can be found on page 6, after the sermon text.)

## Luke 1:46-55

*And Mary said, "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; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 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. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

Our Gospel lesson is the *Magnificat*, the wonderful Song of Mary which she joyfully proclaimed upon meeting her relative Elizabeth who was soon to give birth to John the Baptist. Mary was only beginning to come to grips with the special task she had been given by God to be the mother of the Christ, and when she met her relative who was also carrying a special servant of God, she was overwhelmed by it all and burst into song. This song has been known as the *Magnificat*, which is Latin for *magnifies* or *exalts*, as this is the first word of the song in its Latin version. This brief song is marked by certain familiar themes of faith which were already very evident in her life. Mary sang with humble praise, to the great God who stooped to honor her with the highest privilege of the greatest motherhood. She concludes the song with praise to God for His faithfulness to her people over the many centuries. God is true to His promises, and Mary wanted to celebrate the wonder of this gracious God.

Between these two more familiar themes, however, is a startling and less familiar proclamation which could even be called an announcement of revolution. We usually think of Mary as meek and mild, so it is startling to hear her praise God that *He has shown strength with his arm*. God was moving in power! We too commonly think of God's work as merely lifting our spirits and improving our attitudes, and not of working in great power, but Mary proclaimed great works that were already happening.

*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.*

This is talk of revolution, and we hardly think of Mary as a revolutionary! What could she have meant by these bold pronouncements? We do know that months later this theme would be affirmed by the prophet Simeon when he received the Christ Child at His presentation in the Temple. You may recall his words to Mary as Luke records them: *Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."* (Luke 2:34-35) The old prophet affirmed Mary's words and some might have expected that armed revolt was on its way! We are all well aware that no armed revolt came with the ministry of Jesus, so what are we to make of these radical words of Mary?

Let us start by taking a closer look at these words. Three pronouncements are made, and the commentator William Barclay has labelled them as being statements of *moral*, *social* and finally *economic* revolution. First comes the announcement of a *moral revolution*: *He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts*. Jesus came to a world that was a moral cesspool. The Romans who ruled the world at that time understood only power and personal advancement. It is quite an eye-opener to read the life stories of the powerful Roman leaders of that day as their behavior could best be described as shameless. They did whatever was necessary to advance themselves to greater places of power, and to indulge their own desires. Jesus came preaching a very different Kingdom whose subjects were known for their moral purity, mutual concern and service, and love. The Jews of that day followed the Law of Moses, and though this pointed to righteousness, the religious leaders of that day had turned the Law into a contest to see who could prove themselves the most righteous. Jesus showed a higher and greater way of life. It is worthy of note that while many through the ages have heaped great criticism upon the Church and upon Christians, few if any will dare to criticize Jesus himself, as his righteousness is obvious and beyond any accusation. Jesus began a moral revolution!

Mary also announced a *social revolution*. *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.* At first consideration it would appear that God was going to overthrow the Romans and replace them with godly and caring leaders. This, of course, never happened. One can point out that kingdoms and dynasties are notoriously short-lived. Such it is with human power, and while there seems to be some justice demonstrated in the regularly occurring downfalls of evil empires, there is great sadness to know that these wicked regimes are usually replaced by another one just as evil, or worse! One might be able to argue that nations where Christians

live usually become kinder and more just than other nations, but one cannot take this argument too far as there is plenty of evil and injustice to be found in most any government. So, what has come of this great social revolution?

Perhaps the greatest social change which Christ brought to this world was the belief in human value and dignity. Before Jesus' coming, life was considered to be of little value, especially for the poor and lower classes. Christianity changed that, for the Church preached that each person was created by God and was formed in God's image. Add to this the affirmation that Christ poured out his very life blood to save each person. No person or class of persons can be considered of no value in God's eyes! The Church's ministry and witness spread the belief in human value and the world became a better place. Again, it must be admitted that the world was still a very sinful place, and many still had little regard for human life, but Christ did bring a change for the better.

Mary's final statement sounds the most radical as she announced an *economic revolution*: *He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty*. This statement is particularly difficult to grasp. We do believe that God provides for His people. As followers of Jesus, we hold to such values as hard work, thrift and generosity. One could make the argument that nations populated by Christians have often become prosperous nations, and this prosperity has often been accompanied by a belief in charity. One could also argue that Jesus brought a Gospel of Salvation which the poor embraced and the powerful rejected. But all of this does not sound particularly revolutionary.

So, what are we to believe regarding this revolution, and when shall it come? Mary speaks in the past tense as though it is an accomplished fact! Having looked at her revolutionary claims, let us now look at the timing of it all. When did this revolution take place, or when is it to come? Perhaps the easiest answer of all is to say that Mary is telling of a new world order which will come when Jesus returns in glory at the end of time, and that this can be spoken of as an accomplished fact since God has already ordained it. Christianity has long been mocked as being a mere hope for a someday which may never come. Our faith was never meant to be *only* a matter of a hope for the final day when Christ returns, yet we dare not ignore this dimension of our faith. As we confess weekly, Christ *will come again to judge the living and the dead*, and His Kingdom will be established in its fullness. This should give us great hope as we live for God each day, even though the present world order may not recognize or agree with our values and practices. There will come a day when those who defiantly oppose God and bring suffering to the earth will be cast down and righteousness will rule instead. This will be a wonderful day, but Mary must be speaking of more than just this.

When speaking of the Kingdom of God we generally speak of it as the rule of God which will eventually come in its fullness, *but which is already breaking into our*

*present world.* Jesus did bring change, not only to individual souls, but to the world. In a few centuries the mighty Roman Empire would wither and fall, with Christianity becoming the official religion of that empire, and then spreading well beyond the boundaries of that area. The world and its practices began to change. At the time of Christ, infanticide was a common practice. An unwanted newborn, usually a female which was considered to be of lesser value, would be left out, uncared for and exposed to the elements to die, and this was seen as acceptable. The Church of Jesus Christ soon changed this, not only in their own practice of valuing newborn life, but in their influence over the wider community. Human life was now more highly valued. At Christmas time I often think of the book published twenty or so years ago: *What If Christ Had Not Come?* This book studied the changes brought to the world by the Church, and these were very positive changes. It was the Church which began our universities and institutions of learning. Hospitals and care for the poor were initiatives pursued by the Church, and numerous other charities. This is not to say that non-Christian nations were devoid of all such benevolent works, but these positive developments were greatly multiplied wherever there was a strong Christian presence. Our world is still a far distance from an age of righteousness and justice, but Christ has begun a measurable move in the right direction.

Some have received Mary's words of coming radical change as a justification for modern revolutionary movements. Over the past decades there has grown a system of belief called *Liberation Theology*, which attempts to align Jesus' teachings about the poor with the aims of armed revolutions. While the radical expressions of this belief system are to be rejected, there are grains of truth in much Liberation teaching. God does have a definite affection and special regard for the poor and oppressed. One can look to the Exodus as a prime example of God's rescuing a persecuted people and punishing the mighty, as the Hebrews were set free and the Pharaoh was severely punished. But obviously, the biblical message must not be reduced to a political one, and Liberation Theology should rightly be held at arm's length. Modern liberationists have tried to claim Mary as one of their own, but this does not jibe with the full biblical presentation of either Mary or the Gospel.

Mary's inspired song is a beautiful one which stirs our spirits with delight, and like all of God's inspired Word it contains mystery. Much of this mystery is ours to study and eventually understand, and much of the mystery shall remain that way until we meet the Lord and hear His explanation. Her cry of revolution is one which we can understand, yet it also leaves us perplexed. As I wrestled with the passage it did dawn on me that these words make a lot more sense when we look at Mary as one who lived the revolution she announced. She is the best interpretation of this passage that we will ever find!

Mary lived the humility which would shame the proud. She was a woman of such amazing faith. We readily remember her obedience and suffering, but there is much more. She was wise and discerning, and kept her head in difficult times. She was

humble. It has been said that “Nice guys finish last,” and Mary was not trying to elbow her way to the front of life’s race. Did she finish last? No. Not even by the world’s standards did she finish last. All this happened in the time of Caesar Augustus, the greatest emperor of Rome, but who is better remembered these two thousand years later? This genuinely amazing woman has shamed the proud, as have countless other humble servants of Christ since that time. Your humble witness of love and caring in Christ’s name makes a bigger mark on those around you than you could imagine. Join the revolution. Be a humble servant like Mary.

We speak of Mary as a lowly, young peasant girl, which she was, and she repeatedly proclaimed her low status while God was calling her to do great things. She was a lowly peasant, but her life demonstrated a dignity which would make her stand out in any setting. She lived in a day when life, especially the lives of the poor, were considered of little value, yet Mary lived with a dignity and grace which would surpass that of any royalty. Early in my ministry I served an elderly widow who shared some wise advice she received from her parents when she was a young woman. “My parents told me,” she recalled, “that we are poor people, so hang onto your dignity, because that’s all we really have!” She took her parents at their word and lived a pure and godly life, and what this brought her by her life’s end was something more valuable than any earthly riches. She had a dignity which gave glory to God and testified to her worth and place in the Kingdom.

Recently I attended a funeral of a college friend. I had known Linford rather well in my college days and we even roomed together. Lin was quiet man. In fact, he was what we might call very shy, even backward. At the service I heard testimonies of how Lin was always helping, always serving, generously giving, and never looking to be in the spotlight or to be recognized. He served as a nurse in an area nursing home, and I am sure that he served well. In one respect it could be said that he must have led a lonely life, and I am sure that there must have been some difficult moments. Yet, as I looked back and considered all that he had done, graciously and humbly serving in every way he knew how, I felt very humbled to have known such a great person. The world may not take notice of that quiet life, obediently lived, but I know one who is great in the Kingdom of God. His obituary may not have compared with those around his, whose earthly accomplishments seemed so impressive, but for those who have the eyes to see, the glory of God’s lowly people has been revealed. Mary lived a life of faithful discipleship, and that witness has inspired people ever since to follow in her example. The revolution is on!

Mary has blessed us with a pronouncement of the great revolution:

*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.*

Let us join that revolution, living and serving as Christ guides us, and may we learn from this humble peasant girl who *lived* this revolution. She is uniquely qualified to sing this song, and she would love for us to sing along with her.

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### **Worship Aids:**

#### **A Call to Confession:**

In her song Mary offered a word of warning to those who would stray from God. Take some time to contemplate how we have all strayed, and how we might ask God to change us to be more like Jesus. Consider:

- How have I been proud in the thoughts of my heart? It is so easy to trust in ourselves while turning away from the path of radical obedience.
- How have I clung to and depended upon my earthly power, rather than gladly standing with the lowly? And let us not kid ourselves! We have many earthly powers and privileges.
- How have I rejoiced in my worldly riches rather than waited upon God's blessing to fill me?

#### **Words of Assurance:**

Having presented ourselves to God and having confessed our sins, let us hear the Good News of the Gospel. Mary also proclaimed that God *has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.* God is merciful, even sending Jesus Christ to die for the sins of the world and offer to us a full forgiveness and promise of new life. Believe in and receive this gift of life, and live in peace, forgiven and made new.

#### **A Confession of Faith:**

Let us affirm our faith, using as our confession that great hymn from the Book of Philippians (2:6-11, the New Living Translation):

**We believe in Jesus Christ, who, Though he was God, did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He laid aside his mighty power and glory; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. Because of this, God**

***raised him up to the heights of heaven and gave him a name that is above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.***

### **A Pastoral Prayer:**

*You are our eternal salvation,  
the unfailing life of the world.  
Light everlasting,  
you are truly our redemption.  
Grieving that the human race was perishing  
through the tempter's power,  
without leaving the heights  
you came to the depths in your loving kindness.  
Readily taking our humanity by your own gracious will,  
you saved all earthly creatures, long since lost,  
restoring joy to the world.  
Redeem our souls and bodies, O Christ,  
and so possess us as your shining dwellings.  
By your first coming, make us righteous;  
at your second coming set us free:  
so that, when the world is filled with light  
and you judge all things,  
we may be clad in spotless robes  
and follow in your steps, O King,  
into the heavenly hall.*

– Source Unknown, from the 10th Century

Let us also remember the young people of Bethany Children's Home, particularly those receiving our recently collected gifts:

**Abdul, Alicia, Alondra, Calan, Darius, Gracia, Hope, Jahlexys, Jasmine, Mason, Matthew, Skylor, Xavier, and Zoa**

May God guide you in a time of prayer to lift up, not only your own concerns and burdens, but the many needs of our neighbors, and a hurting world.

### **Benediction:**

*May the Lord bless you and protect you.  
May the Lord smile on you and show you his favor.  
May the Lord befriend you and prosper you.*

– Source Unknown