

The Great Reversal

Text: Luke 1:36-58

Hymn: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" (*LSB* 357)

In Luke's Gospel, the account of Jesus' birth is surrounded by three canticles, three songs, the Song of Mary, the song of Zechariah, and the song of Simeon. These have taken their place in the heart of the Christian church's worship every day for roughly as long as we know, Zechariah's Song being sung by Christians in the morning, Mary's in the early evening, and Simeon's at the end of the day. These songs have such a central place because they are the voice of the Holy Spirit himself speaking to us of the gifts which come to us when Jesus comes to us.

Our Gospel reading today happens to be the first of these songs, the Song of Mary, the words Mary spoke when she went to visit her relative Elizabeth, who herself was expecting miraculously by God's gift the birth of a son. As a sign of things to come—wherever Jesus goes in his earthly ministry, there the Holy Spirit is at work—already when Jesus enters the house in His mother's womb, Elizabeth and her child are both filled with the Holy Spirit and Elizabeth speaks the greeting that we know today as the "Hail, Mary," which themselves are wonderful words (and not just when the Cowboys are down with one minute left in the game). Sadly, however, this greeting, "Hail, Mary, full of grace, blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb," had a few lines added to it in the Middle Ages, making the "Ave, Maria" unusable, turning it into an invocation to Mary, "Pray for us sinners now and at the time of our death." Of course, the words up until that point, being from Scripture itself, are perfectly appropriate, just as it is appropriate to call Mary "the mother of God."

Over this very thing the church was split in the fourth century, when a bishop of by the name of Nestorius wanted to get rid of the devotional title given to Mary, “the mother of God,” and the church refused to budge, not out of reverence so much for Mary, but as recognition of her special place in God’s plan of salvation. Unless Mary is the mother of God her Son is not God. The church affirmed then as it does today that Mary was indeed blessed above all women to have been granted the privilege of being the mother of her own Lord. In the words of a modern Christmas carol, “This Child that you delivered Will soon deliver you.”

As she was surrounded by all these wonderful works of God, seeing the work of the Holy Spirit wherever she went, having been visited by the angel and despite the shame and disgrace her condition brought upon her in society, Mary herself sang her song of praise, the Magnificat—so called because of the first words in Latin, *magnificat anima mea*. “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Like Hannah, the mother of Samuel, Mary was able to marvel at the great reversal that God was working through the gift of His Son Jesus, whom she was honored to bear in her body. “My soul magnifies the Lord,” she says, “and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has regarded the humble estate of His servant.” God had mercy on Mary. God was pleased to see Mary in her humble estate, a young woman, from a little hamlet by the name of Nazareth, from the Galilee of the Gentiles, as good enough for the Lord to become the bearer of His Son.

Not because of her humility. She doesn’t boast in her humility, as we are sometimes tempted to do, but instead because of *His* mercy and *His* might. She gives us a clue as to how God worked in her life as He does in all our lives. “His mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation.” It doesn’t matter who you are,

where you are, or when you are, God has mercy on those who fear Him. And to those who fear Him, such as Mary, God always has the same greeting. When God sends His angels to bring a direct message from the throne of heaven to people, they always open with the same words, "Fear not." To those who fear God, God says, "Fear not." Contrariwise, those who do not fear God have much to fear from God.

That sets the tone for Mary's Song. For that matter, it sets the tone for the whole Gospel that came in Jesus Christ. The great reversal. God pays no regard to earthly hierarchies. God pays no regard to the way the world sees value and honor and worth. God has His own way of judging things. It shouldn't be a surprise to us, knowing that the world is in opposition to God on account of sin, that God's perspective runs diametrically opposed to the world's way of seeing things. God has mercy on those fear Him. To them He says, "Fear not."

He brings down the mighty, exalts those of humble estate. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich He has sent empty away. He takes the great and mighty in the world and puts them in their place, brings the towers built by man and the kingdoms erected by us to dust. Many times throughout history the ambition of a politician or general has been to establish an eternal kingdom. The Romans did pretty well. But after a thousand years nothing was left of it. The thousand-year empire of more recent history, the so-called Third Reich, thankfully lasted only twelve. However mighty they may appear, however long they last, they are only pawns in God's plan for bringing about His salvation. He lifts them up for His purposes and when the time is right, He knocks them down again. But those who are of low estate, these whom the world doesn't esteem but fear God, are precious in God's eyes and they are lifted up.

So, we find in Mary's Song the shape of the Christian's life. Thirty or so years later, John the Baptist had to remind his disciples that he was not the culmination, he was not the Christ but had come to lead people to Christ. And when they were jealous for him and envious of Jesus' success, he told them that Jesus must increase while he must decrease (Jn 3:30). St. Paul was burdened by a thorn in the flesh and prayed three times for it to be taken away and three times God replied, "My grace is sufficient, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:1-10). And so Paul was able to teach us even today that when we are weak, He is strong.

The Christian life consists of emptying and filling. We are to be emptied of ourselves again and again, so that the Lord might fill us up with His might. We are to be stripped bare that He might adorn us; we are to be brought down from our pedestal so that He might lift us up to the place that He has prepared for us; we call this repentance and faith. In repentance, we acknowledge to God that we have reason to fear Him on account of our rebellion against Him. And when we do that, trusting in His mercy through His Son Jesus, the Son of Mary, the Son of God, He says to us, "Fear not; I have called you by name. You are mine" (Is 43:1). "As far as the east is from the west, so far [have I removed] your transgressions from you" (Ps 103:12). This is the shape of the individual Christian's life.

This is also the shape of the church's life. There is a historical cycle that seems to repeat itself regularly. After a while, the church always seems to think that it is cleverer than it actually is. It gets puffed up with its human ideas and programs. And so God needs to bring the church so that He can build it up. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who himself perished shortly before the thousand-year Reich came down, wrote that our task

is to do what Mary did, to confess God, to confess, confess, and again confess. Not to build, not to tear down. That's for God to do. When we confess Christ the Lord, and the Father who sends Him, in the power of the Holy Spirit, then God will build his church. And the times that look like building up may actually be times of stripping down and vice versa: what looks to us like dismantling may in fact be when God is doing His building.

But, above all, we do well to follow the example of Mary in singing praise to God. That sounds like an obvious thing, but as Martin Luther pointed out: Although she lists all the mighty works of God from which she has benefitted and which are for all people, she doesn't magnify *them*, she magnifies *the Lord*. Because we are self-centered by nature, we humans tend to enjoy like children at Christmas the gifts more than the giver, the presents more than the one who gave them, and to become fixated on them. Children have to be reminded to say "thank you" in between tearing off wrapping paper and playing with their new toys. So we are with God.

But Mary teaches us how to praise God. "My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." When we pursue God and His kingdom, all things will be given us, far more than we deserve, far more than we can imagine. When we pursue the gifts, we will eventually be left gasping for air. So we sing with Mary of the magnificence, the greatness of God, which is shown not in great displays of power and glory as the world sees power and glory but in the foolishness and weakness of the Cross. That the eternal Son of God made His power known by entering the womb of little insignificant Mary, was pleased to be born of her in the great poverty of Bethlehem, to grow up in the hamlet of Nazareth in a humble artisan's vocation, to walk around with twelve dim-witted fishermen, to die at the hands of the people He came to save, to be

proclaimed ever since then by more dim-witted men, to be believed in by slow-witted, weak-in-faith men and women throughout the world and to glory in their weakness. For when we are weak, He is strong. When we are empty, He can fill us up. When we are low, He can lift us up. The lower we begin, the farther He lifts us up. He came down to be one of us, so that He might bring us up with Him to join Him in the Father's glory.

All these things were hidden from the eyes of Mary and Elizabeth, and Christ remains hidden from the physical eyes and the esteem of the world. But by God's grace, they are revealed to us in God's Word, which unlike the kingdoms of the world, stands forever. And where the Word of God is heard, there the voice of the Holy Spirit is heard. And where this voice proclaims the good news of the coming in humility of our mighty Lord and Savior, there through the hearing of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit still works faith so that men and women, old and young, may come to fear the Lord and they too hear those all-comforting words of God, "Fear not."

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