

Blessed
Luke 1:46b-55

There is a story about a devout soul who died and went to heaven; there she met Mary the mother of Jesus. This heavenly neophyte filled with all those questions one expects to have when entering the pearly gates asked Mary, why, for all her blessings, does she always appear in paintings as a bit sad, a bit wistful? “Is everything O.K.?”

Mary reassured this newly arrived soul: “Oh, everything’s great. No problems. It’s just ... it’s just that we . . . well... we wanted a daughter.”

With that little bit of irreverence we turn to Mary’s beautiful song of praise commonly called the *Magnificat*. This title comes from the Latin for *magnify*. Mary through song and poetry magnifies the Lord, proclaiming God’s greatness and rejoicing in God as Savior. She begins with God’s actions in her own life, for in choosing her to be the mother of the messiah, the Mighty One has indeed “done great things for” her. Her kinswoman Elizabeth has just welcomed and honored her, saying, “blessed is she who believed.” And with this Mary ponders and proclaims with amazement in her song that not only Elizabeth but all generations will call her blessed.

In our culture “#(hash-tag)blessed” has become a meme, and “*feeling blessed*” makes regular appearances in Facebook posts. People post photos or tweet images of themselves enjoying a delicious meal or an exotic vacation or a shopping spree at their favorite store. Underneath these photos they post “*Feeling blessed*”.

And while some of the posts will be photos of family gatherings, children playing, grandchildren cuddling with their grands, by-in-large in our social media

culture “*blessed*” has come to mean living a life of privilege and comfort. Using the term has become a way of celebrating those moments when everything is going well and all seems right with the world -- or at least one’s own little corner of it.

The blessedness that Mary celebrates stands in stark contrast to our culture’s attitude. By our standards she does not look at all blessed. Yes, God has chosen her to be the mother of the messiah, but in practical terms what does that mean for her? She is not from a family that can afford expensive food or clothing. She is a nobody, a peasant girl from a small village. Her friends and neighbors see her as a disgrace because she is unmarried and pregnant. Even her husband to be thought it best to dismiss her quietly until the angel convinced him otherwise. (Mt. 1:19).

Furthermore, as she will soon learn from Simeon if she hasn’t perceived it already, being the mother of the messiah is scarcely an unmixed blessing. She will bear the unspeakable grief of watching as her son is rejected, shamed, and crucified: “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2:34–35). Despite all this, Mary praises God for honoring her.

Beyond this, she perceives God’s action in her life as consistent with God’s saving action in history. The Mighty One’s agenda differs radically from the plans of human rulers. Mary’s celebration of God’s strong arm recalls Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2:1–10. Like Mary, Hannah experienced a miraculous pregnancy. Like Mary’s son, Hannah’s son Samuel spoke God’s word. Both Hannah and Mary praise God for overturning society’s structures by bringing down the powerful and lifting up the powerless. Mary’s song does not share Hannah’s militaristic

imagery, however, for Mary's son will bless not the makers of war, but the peacemakers. As the script of our Advent skit reminded us, what what was born in Mary turns the world "***right-side out.***"

Mary sings about the God who saves not just souls, but embodied people. The God she celebrates is not content merely to point people toward heaven; *God's redemptive work begins here on earth.*

God fills the hungry not only with hope, but with food.

Rather than being satisfied with merely comforting the lowly,

Mary's Lord lifts them up, granting them dignity and honor,

a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation.

At the same time, God shows strength by disrupting the world's power structures, dethroning rulers, and humbling the mighty.

Clearly such saving acts are good news for the poor and lowly, but what does Mary's song mean for the wealthy and the powerful? Is there nothing but judgment for them? Though judgment and salvation may seem like opposites, they go hand in hand. Those who stand in awe only of themselves and their own power will be judged. Yet, if the wealthy and powerful can only see it, by bringing them down -- by emptying and humbling them -- God is saving them. When they turn their gaze from themselves and their own accomplishments, when their awe is directed to God -- then they might know mercy as well.

Both in Mary's song and in Jesus' ministry we see the God who *loves* us as we are but does not *leave* us as we are. Zacchaeus, for example, shows us God's saving love in action. As a tax collector, Zacchaeus is wealthy, but he is also a scorned outsider. When Jesus invites himself to dinner at Zacchaeus's house, the encounter leaves Zacchaeus emptied of his wealth, yes, but welcomed into the

community and profoundly changed. His gaze is redirected from himself toward Jesus. He no longer sees only his own needs and desires. Now he sees those whom he has harmed in his quest for money and security. Jesus brings Zacchaeus down from his wealth and up from his shame. In the process he frees him. Indeed, salvation has come to his house (Luke 19:9).

When God empties the rich of their excess and fills the hungry with good things, the result is not social reversal -- with the powerless and the powerful changing places -- *as much as it is social leveling*.

The rich and powerful are stripped of their arrogance and taught to love their neighbors as they love themselves. Thus God provides for the poor and honors the humiliated. When the arrogant are scattered and the powerful brought down, then every person has access to enough of the world's resources, and no one has too much. Every person is treated with dignity and respect, and no one uses power to harm.

Mary's song magnifies the Savior who loves the whole world with a love that makes creation whole. God's saving judgment is for all of us, bringing us down from the pride that fills us with ourselves until we can't see either God or neighbor, bringing us up from the shame that distorts our worldview and convinces us that no one -- not even God -- could love us.

The mother of the Messiah has experienced God's blessing and she sings of it. She is not #blessed. Her blessing, like ours, is a cross-shaped blessing, "a condition of complete simplicity (costing not less than everything)" as T. S. Eliot so memorably said, yet bringing true freedom, the priceless gift of God's salvation. And with this true blessing which runs deeper than just feeling. Amen?