

Lifting the Lowly 12.21.14 Luke 1:46-55 Stephanie Ryder

And Mary* said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour 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 for ever.'

I live behind Alto field in Mill Valley. Literally, my back gate opens up to a bike path and on the other side of that bike path is Alto field. It's one of the reasons our home was so attractive – we moved from E. Blithedale in Mill Valley, where traffic was increasing and it felt like life or death crossing with my then little children to go to school. We moved at the end of October, 11 years ago, and awoke that first morning in our new home to the sound of laughing hollering children and their parents on the soccer field. Well before 8am. During the day we delight in the sounds from the school, Edna Maguire – the principal making announcements on the loudspeaker, the beloved PE teachers shouting into the cone, “123 eyes on me!” and children singing daily “happy birthday” or, in springtime “Inch by inch, row by row, gonna make this garden grow.” On the weekends, we hear the clink of the ball on the bat. We call them “happy sounds.” A few summers ago, the soccer league decided it was time to refurbish the field. Gone were the happy sounds that year, and the beauty of the fresh green-apple brilliance. Sounds of laughter in the morning were replaced with giant trucks, the diesel wafting into the open windows, and I looked out from my deck upon a sea of brown dirt. The trucks were there from sunrise to sunset, all of June, July, August and September... It was the same summer as the wildfires and even the sky was brown that summer. Leveling the playing fields does not always seem so appealing and is not necessarily a pleasant experience for all. However, it is an edified theme in the Gospel passage today.

The text from Luke chapter 1 is known as the Song of Mary or the *Magnificat*, for as

Cornel said last week in his sermon, *Magnificat* is Latin for the first words of the passage, "My soul magnifies." The passage is spoken by the newly pregnant Mary who is visiting her cousin, Elizabeth, also pregnant with the future John the Baptist. Elizabeth says her child has jumped for joy within her womb upon their arrival. When Elizabeth praises Mary for her faith, Mary sings this *Magnificat* in response. It is one of four hymns in Luke, which complement the promise/fulfillment theme of Luke's infancy narrative. In form, content, and structure, the songs are patterned on Jewish "hymns of praise." The opening stanza displays synonymous parallelism -- a characteristic feature of Hebrew poetry: my soul/my spirit; magnifies/rejoices; the Lord/God my Savior." The parallelism continues, but shifts to contrasting parallels: God has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry, and sent the rich away empty. The *Magnificat* resembles several Old Testament biblical passages, most notably the Song of Hannah, in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. Hannah, living in Israel under the threat of the Philistines, who was barren is blessed with a son, sings similar phrases such as: My heart rejoices in the LORD; in the LORD my horn is lifted high; the bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength; the Lord humbles and exalts.

The *Magnificat* serves as a warning for the proud, the powerful and the rich, who, like the lowly and hungry, experience a reversal of fortunes. Scholars question just who are the powerful, and who are the lowly mentioned in this passage. Raymond Brown says the lowly are the Jewish Christian *anawim* -- the poor of every sort: the vulnerable, the marginalized, the socio-economically oppressed, and those of lowly status without earthly power. Others believe the text refers to the Gentile oppressors of ancient Israel. When Mary of Nazareth discovers she is pregnant with God's child, she is living in occupied territory, under the Roman Empire (which, interestingly, crumbled in the 5th century, while people all over the world are still following and celebrating Mary's baby).

If we look to the Greek text, we find that the rich in verse 53, from the Greek word πλουτέω (plooteh'-o) means those having many resources, or an abundance of outward possessions. The Greek word for lowly, as in God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant (v 48) and God has lifted up the lowly (v 52) comes from the Greek word ταπεινός (tapeinos') which is related to being humble, and is defined as "inner lowliness in spirit or circumstances describing the person who *depends* on the Lord rather than *self*, a person who is *God*-reliant rather than *self*-reliant -- which (the definition says) ironically *always exalts* a person." The *anawim* depended totally on God for whatever they owned, and it is speculated that Mary of Nazareth belonged to the *anawim*. Mary's absolute acceptance of God's plan allows the Spirit to work in her. In proclaiming her *Magnificat*, she acknowledges that the Almighty has done great things for her in her lowliness in contrast to God's dealings with the proud.

A friend once told me "Religion is for poor people." And although he was saying this as a person of privilege meaning he himself had no use for religion, if we consider

the above definitions, this friend was absolutely correct. Nicaraguan priest Father Ernesto Cardenal says, "It's not the rich but the poor who need liberation; However, in this this reversal of fortunes, both the rich and the poor will be liberated; us poor are going to be liberated from the rich – the rich are going to be liberated from themselves, that is, from their wealth, because they're more slaves than we are." In this leveling of the playing fields, then, this reversal of fortunes about which Mary sings, all will triumph.

I love what theologian Frederick Buechner has to say about riches in his book, *Wishful Thinking*: "The trouble with being rich is that since you can solve with your checkbook virtually all of the practical problems that bedevil ordinary people, you are left in your leisure with nothing but the great human problems to contend with: how to be happy, how to love and be loved, how to find meaning and purpose in your life. In desperation the rich are continually tempted to believe that they can solve these problems too with their checkbooks, which is presumably what led Jesus to remark one day that for a rich man to get to Heaven is about as easy as for a Cadillac to get through a revolving door." (He was paraphrasing there!)

Our culture leads us to believe that money is the end-goal, that power or fame is the solution to our discontent. But after the remodel, after the award is presented, after the promotion, after the exotic holiday excursion, we are left with and still must face the realities of life: disease, illness, addictions, divorce, death of our children, dementia, death of our parents, betrayal, cancer, affairs, loss of our lifetime partners, and tragedies of all kinds. We are eventually left with an emptiness that only God's love can truly fill.

Buechner says, "In a sense we are all hungry and in need, but most of us don't recognize it. With plenty to eat in the deep freeze, with a roof over our heads and a car in the garage, we assume that the empty feeling inside must be just a case of the blues that can be cured by a Florida vacation, a new TV, an extra drink before supper. The poor, on the other hand, are under no such delusion. When Jesus says, 'Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,' the poor stand a better chance than most of knowing what he's talking about and knowing that he's talking to them. In desperation they may even be willing to consider the possibility of accepting his offer. This is perhaps why Jesus on several occasions called them, (the poor) peculiarly blessed."

Blessed are those that see their need for God. Perhaps this is what it means that the rich will be sent away empty... because it is only in the recognition of their emptiness that they will be truly filled. If you're not low, you can't be lifted. When my son was in middle school he asked me why he had to go to church when none of his friends had to. I told him that it was important to form a relationship with God, because one day, sooner or later, it will be all you have, it's what you'll rely on, and you will be grateful to have it.

A few days after my ordination ceremony, I ran into a friend who had seen photos on Facebook. Actually, he ran into me, because, it was before I got my new glasses, and I didn't see him at first. He said, "Oh, now that you're a Reverend you're not going to say hi to me?" I was stunned, because, actually, I feel like it is the exact opposite. Now that I'm ordained, I'm not allowed to be high and mighty, arrogant and condescending, right? Cornel said to me after the robe and stole –the symbols of the office -- were put on, "Stephanie, chosen for this new life of love, clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with others and forgive whatever grievances you have against anyone. Forgive as God forgives you. And most of all, put on love, which binds all these virtues together in perfect unity and peace." Not saying "hi" definitely opposes this charge. Similarly, when membership/fellowship committee was helping me plan the reception, one of the members asked if I wanted photos taken, so I could one day, when I'm really successful, show where I started, the humble beginnings. "I think it's the opposite," I said, "I think I'm supposed to go the other direction...I think I'm supposed to take on the role of a servant..."

What strikes me about this passage, Mary's song, *the Magnificat*, is that she seems to know her place in relationship to God, and it is a place of humility and gratitude. She doesn't say, "Of course I would be the one to bear the Son of God, I'm fully capable and perfectly qualified!" She doesn't say, "Oh, it's because of my great upbringing, or because I got such good grades, or because God knows I'm such a fine hostess and a phenomenal chef!" She gives God all the glory and praise. She doesn't claim to have a thing to do with it besides being a lowly servant of the Lord. (She knows that God will equip her specifically because she *can't* do it on her own.) Mary's *Magnificat* show us that if we're not serving God, God cannot be magnified, God cannot do great things for us, because we think we are doing them for ourselves. Those who hold God in awe see God's mercy and are protected by God's strong arm. Those who need God and seek God and call on God are filled with good things and are continually helped. God made a promise long ago, and God holds true to that promise: "I will be your God, and you will be my people." God loves God's people. God loves humanity so much, that God became one of us. The Word made flesh. It was in surrendering herself to God that Mary became the mother of Christ. Such as it is in our own lives – when we surrender to a strength that is not our own, we are filled with the piercing white light of God's love that is Christ, and miracles happen. Poet Philip Britt says, "If the decisive and liberating God is to be born on this earth, it must, like in Mary, find room in humble surrender. Christ is born in the poverty of our hearts."

In the Old Testament reading today (1 Samuel 7:1-11,16), David has the great idea of building a house for the Ark of the Covenant, to replace the the silly old tent that's been carried around, a house, a great big mansion built with the finest materials for God to dwell. God says, "What do I need a house for? I don't want a house! I go where you go, I have been with you wherever you have been, I don't need a house! I'm going to build *you* a house, in the form of a dynasty, that will last forever..." And,

sure enough, God houses God's very self in Mary. Mary is the dwelling place, the tent and the temple. God is literally, physically, in her. Could God be more clear? Emmanuel. God with us. Wherever we go, whatever our circumstances.

Can we today, allow our souls to magnify God for the great things the Lord has done? People in this church have spoken about how wonderful it was to have a full church at a couple of recent events, and yet this place -- just as it is now -- is blessed by God. My in-law's witnessed their church in upstate NY grow from 12 people in a living room to the current 3,000 members and 5 services each Sunday. My father-in-law claims there is something missing from the intimacy of that once-small church. There is no accountability now, he says... you can come and go and not say hi to another person and he hardly recognizes anybody anymore. He says he misses singing in community from a hymnal, now that there is a full band playing as entertainment with words displayed on a screen and thus there is some permission to just sit back and watch. A small church requires participation and accountability. It requires intimacy and connection. And not only does it require this, it offers this. In a small church, we can identify the newcomers, and reach out to them. We know if someone is missing. God is here. We do not need to be a big cathedral of marble with 800 members to be a success in God's eyes. In fact, we don't want to get to the point where we don't even need God anymore because we're managing just fine on our own! God chose Mary of Nazareth in whom to be born. A young, unknown, unwed teenager in an obscure, oppressed, occupied town. Mary, *Theotokos*: the one who gives birth to God, God-bearer.

In the level playing field, all will call on God. God wants to be called upon. Then, we can all be God-bearers. Whatever the condition of your circumstances or spirit today, know that God's love is within you, ready to be born. The good news is that God's love is available to us right here, right now. All we need to do, like Mary, is say Yes.
