

Sermon for Sunday, February 5, 2017

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

Guest Preacher: Wanda Deifelt, Professor of Religion, Luther College

First Reading: Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm: 112:1-9; Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:1-12; Gospel: Luke 1:46-56

Sermon on the Magnificat, The Song of Mary

It seems unusual to hear Mary's song, the Magnificat, any time other than Advent or Christmas. It seems that we, Protestants, keep Mary tied to the foot of the manger in the same way as the ox and the donkey. You may also be surprised to have a sermon focused on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation addressing Mary, the mother of Jesus. Here we already have two important things to learn. First, Martin Luther never abolished saints. What he did was to promote everybody who is baptized to that category. Yes, everybody who is baptized is a saint, and becomes part of the communion of believers. But because we are also human and full of transgressions and limitations, we are also sinners, always begging for God's mercy and grace. We are 100% saints and sinners. Not 50% saint or 50% sinner, but fully, completely, 100% both sinner and saint.

The second clarification is that Martin Luther was a big fan of Mary. He even wrote a treatise on the Magnificat in 1521, and dedicated it to John Frederick, the seventeen-year-old son of the Elector John of Saxony. Luther believed that the words of the Magnificat ought to serve as guideline for all leaders, in particular those who hold public office. He addressed the young duke as a pastor would, reminding him that in his hands lie to wellbeing or ruin of many.

In the canticle of the Magnificat, Luther stressed the fact that Mary identifies herself with "humilitas." *Humilitas* is Latin for humbleness or humility. The words humanity and humility share the same root – humus, earth – which means that humility is a characteristic of humanity. Humility is not only to be human but also to be grounded, to be down to earth. Mary represents all of humanity because all of us share the fact that we are made of earth and go back to earth (humus) once we die.

In the Magnificat, *humilitas* is a virtue. A young woman from a lowly estate who rises to a dizzying height because she is to give birth to the son of God could become arrogant and spiteful. Instead, Mary is humble. She knows that she is not deserving of this great honor, and yet God chooses her. Jesus could have been born in a palace, with a wealthy family, but God chose the weak and vulnerable instead. Luther stresses Mary's lowly condition. She was a young woman, perhaps scared of being accused of adultery, and yet confident. The tremendous mystery taking place within her was not of her own doing, but God's. You can see why Luther emphasized this so much – Mary embodies the core of Luther's theological gem: that our merits are not our own, but God acting through us. We cannot save ourselves, but God's grace reaches

us. We are saved not because of our good works, but by grace, through faith. Even before Jesus was born, Mary was already proclaiming this truth and the good news that it entailed.

Humilitas is not only a virtue; it is also an attitude. Throughout the centuries, many followers of Christ maintained that Jesus only proclaimed a spiritual kingdom and that he came to save people's souls. The Magnificat sets the record straight and lays out the blueprint for this reign. Its aim is not only the salvation of souls but also the wellbeing of bodies: the hungry are fed, the disenfranchised embraced by the community, and the downtrodden exalted while the proud and mighty are sent away empty-handed. Christianity did not always welcome this message because it goes against the core of our own ambitions and worldviews. We condone justification by works in the form of success and wealth, and we blame those who don't succeed. But it makes perfect sense in the logic of the Magnificat: how can we embrace the son of God if our arms and hands are full with the parcels and bags of our own merits and accomplishments? Only we are empty-handed and open-armed can we receive God's embrace

For Martin Luther, the Magnificat was recommended to all the princes and lords, to all who are in leadership position. The Magnificat should be their bedside reading. It was a reminder that, similar to Mary, they should be humble and seek the common good. They should not boast or be prideful, defending their own interests. Rather, their vocation was to be servants and look out to protect those in need. The Magnificat is the script they ought to follow, said Luther, because leaders often think that they answer to nobody when, in fact, they have to answer to an even higher power, namely God. For Luther, the Magnificat is a statement of personal and political ethics.

“The eyes of the world and of humanity, on the contrary, look only above them and are lifted up with pride... This we experience every day. Every one strives after that which is above them, after honor, power, wealth, knowledge, a life of ease, and whatever is lofty and great. And where such folk are, there are many hangers-on, all the world gathers round them, gladly yields them service, and would be by their side and share in their high estate... On the other hand, no one is willing to look into the depths with its poverty, disgrace, squalor, misery and anguish. From these all turn away their eyes. Where there are such folk, everyone takes to their heels, forsakes and shuns and leaves them to themselves; no one dreams of helping them nor of making something out of them. And so they remain in the depths and in their low and despised estate. [This] St. Paul teaches in Romans 12:6, when he says, “Dear brothers and sisters, set not your mind on high things, but go along with the lowly.”

Finally, the Magnificat also introduces one of the hallmarks of Luther's theology: a theology of the cross. The cross is not an idealization of suffering, as it has so often been misinterpreted. It is not for those who are downtrodden and lowly to accept their fate in passivity, as if God willed for God's children to endure pain. Rather, for us, the cross is a becoming, a transformation, a crossing over, ceasing to be the old creature and turning into a new being in Christ. It moves us from death to life. As Luther says “God is a Lord whose work consists but of this – to exalt them of low degree, to put down the mighty from their seats, in short, to break whatever is whole and make whole whatever is broken.” The cross does this: it breaks what is sinful, selfish, prideful, or arrogant and sanctifies it in humility and generosity. Because God's love and mercy meets us wherever we are, and in the struggle we find ourselves in, the cross transforms the brokenness of human existence and makes us whole. It mends the faults of low self-esteem and lack of confidence in our gifts, our voicelessness in the face of abuse and violence, the silence in light of

injustice. Luther's affirmation that Christianity needs to break what is whole and make whole what is broken was later paraphrased by Reinhold Niebuhr, when he said that the church ought to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." This is a difficult task. Who wants to rock the boat? Who wants to challenge those who sit high on their chairs? Who wants to comfort those who are vulnerable and sit with them in their pain and tell truth to power? Martin Luther did – and he knew that this call, this vocation, could cost him his life.

When Luther coined the phrase *simul iustus et peccator* (that we are at the same time saints and sinners), he wasn't quoting the medieval hierarchy of sins espoused by the Catholic Church because he didn't agree with it. For him, sin is sin, and just because one didn't break the law didn't mean one was any less guilty. Not only that, he also expanded this notion: sin is not only the bad that is done, but also the good that is left undone. We sin not only when we break commandments. It is also the lack of care and concern for the neighbor. We sin when we are capable of doing something and we don't; when we have the means but shy away.

Ultimately, the Magnificat is not only a guide for persons in public office and leadership, but it is a blueprint for Christian discipleship. It summarizes what Christ's ministry is all about and invites us to follow in the same path. But this discipleship is costly, it doesn't come cheap. Dietrich Bonhoeffer already warned us: "Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ...."

The Magnificat is the hymn of praise for God becoming incarnate, God choosing to walk in our midst, healing the broken and breaking the whole. For Luther, at incarnation and with the cross, God retells what was already done in creation. God takes what is nothing, worthless, despised, wretched and dead, and makes something, precious, honorable, blessed and living.

This is what Mary teaches us in the Magnificat. In her, nothingness became something. Her prophetic voice foreshadows the ministry of her son and becomes a guideline for our own being in the world. May the Magnificat be an inspiration to us as it was for Martin Luther. Let the Magnificat teach us how to know, love, and praise God as well.

Amen!