

Testifying to Love: The Topsy-Turvy Gospel

Luke 1:39-55

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Prayer: *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.*

The title of today's sermon is "Testifying to Love: The Topsy-Turvy Gospel." Once again, I have changed my sermon title from what was printed in the newsletter. Nevertheless, I have not changed the scripture; it is still Luke 1:39-55. In this passage, Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth and sings a hymn that has been called the Magnificat, from the first word in Latin. Indeed, in these opening chapters of Luke, there are four hymns: the "Magnificat," sung by Mary in 1:46-55 when she meets her cousin Elizabeth, the "Benedictus," sung by Zechariah in 1:68-79 at his son John's birth, the "Gloria," sung by the heavenly hosts in 2:14 at Jesus' birth, and the "Nunc Dimittis," sung by Simeon when he sees the baby Jesus in the temple in 2:29-32. Incidentally, those titles are in Latin from the Latin version of the hymns. People often say that their favorite thing about the Christmas holidays is the music. But that goes back to perhaps the earliest days of Christianity. Indeed, the earliest Christians may have been singing these hymns in worship. And Luke adapted them to his Gospel.

But let's put all this in context. The angel Gabriel has already told the aged priest Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth was going to have a baby, who would become a great prophet. And she becomes pregnant. In the sixth month of her pregnancy, Gabriel tells Mary that even though she's a virgin, she is going to have a baby, who would be the Son of God. Gabriel also tells Mary that her aged cousin Elizabeth is pregnant.

By the way, only in Luke are Jesus and John related by blood. Elizabeth and Mary are cousins. Luke doesn't tell us how they are cousins. But they are related. And Mary is so excited about her cousin being pregnant, she travels the 50 miles or so from Nazareth to Jerusalem to see her cousin. She would have not made a straight shot because she would not have gone around Samaria.

When Mary enters Zechariah's and Elizabeth's house, she greets her cousin, and the baby jumps for joy inside Elizabeth's womb. I remember when my wife, Joy, was pregnant with our first child Anastasia. I would read to her the poetry from Langston Hughes. That seemed to calm her.

Mary provided her own poetry to the pre-natal Jesus. She sang a hymn, which was based on a hymn that Hannah, the mother of Samuel, sang. We find her hymn in 1 Samuel 2. Hannah was not able to have children, but the Lord remembered her, and she conceived (1 Sam 1:19-20). Amy-Jill Levine reminded us that it is a frequent theme in the Old Testament that a woman seemingly incapable of bearing children does in fact become pregnant.

So it was with Hannah. After her son Samuel was born, she sang a song. Both Hannah's and Mary's song begin with a note of joy. Hannah sings, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God" (1 Sam 2:1). Similarly, Mary sings, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47). Both hymns begin on a note of joy.

But what do Hannah and Mary rejoice about? They rejoice that God is redrawing the power map—in love. Let me say that again: Hannah and Mary rejoice that God is redrawing the power map in love. Hannah sings, “The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength” (1 Sam 2:4). Mary sings, “[God] 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” (Luke 1:52-53).

What does this passage have to say to us here on this fourth Sunday of Advent? Two things: First, we might take up this first line of the Magnificat as our constant prayer to center us. Paul says to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). What shall we pray? We might repeat sentences from the Bible, such as this one, silently with eyes wide open and going about our daily business.

For example, we might say this sentence over and over in our mind, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” “My soul magnifies the Lord.” As you go about your Christmas shopping, your family gatherings, your decorating, it is easy to get off center. It is easy to allow anxiety to reign. Whenever you feel that you are getting off center, take these five words as your prayer: “My soul magnifies the Lord.” “My soul magnifies the Lord.” It is the refrain of Hannah from the Old Testament; it is the refrain of Mary from the New Testament.

I remember one morning this week I was lost in my mind in thoughts about something that happened to me many years ago. I was entangled in the blame game, and I started replaying the events. I did this right, and they did this wrong. Blah blah blah. The blame game is never any fun. Fortunately, I stopped myself, or rather, Spirit stopped me and refocused me on these words: “My soul magnifies the Lord.” And so, I went about my business with this sentence on my mind: “My soul magnifies the Lord.” It helped to center me on what I was doing—for a few minutes, and then I got preoccupied, and then I thought again of this sentence: “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

Wouldn't it be good if our minds just stayed on certain thoughts, and we didn't become distracted? No matter how spiritual or focused or mature we are, we become distracted. That is simply how our minds work. We have to keep coming back to center. “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” And the main thing in the Christian life is love, is joy, is peace, is hope.

The reason that Hannah and Mary rejoice is that God is redrawing the power map—in love. Those who are on top are put on the bottom; those who are on the bottom are placed on the top. There is a massive redistribution of power.

In Bible study, we were talking about this passage, and someone said that they were confused: Mary sang that all these things were happening to her and in the world simply because she was going to have a baby?! It does seem a bit strange. I think that this is Luke's voice speaking through Mary. Luke was convinced that the life and ministry of Jesus was the beginning of the coming of the new humanity. We were talking about three weeks ago, on the first Sunday of Advent. The Messiah was born to a virgin in the backwaters of the Roman Empire. He sought solidarity with the poor, and he was executed for sedition against the state. But God reversed the status, through the resurrection, a guarantee that the powerful would not reign forever.

Even now, God is redrawing the map of power—in love. Perhaps we see it, but sometimes it is invisible. God is reshaping things on behalf of liberation. John Dominic Crossan hit that note hard in our webinar last week on the nativity narratives. Jesus offers liberation. Crossan said that he did not use the term “liberation theology” because he thought that it was a redundancy to say “liberation theology” because theology is liberating. I say “amen” to that, brother. Amen! Indeed, if you are reading the Bible in a way that is oppressive, then you’re reading it in the wrong way.

What power shifts are taking place here at First Church, West Hartford? In the last two years you have had a pastoral retirement, an interim pastor, a bridge pastor, and now a pastoral candidate scheduled to preach next month. Whenever there is a change in leadership, there is a shift in power. What power shifts have you seen in these two years? What power shifts do you see in the next two years, next five, next ten?

And what do we say to these power shifts? “My soul magnifies the Lord.” It may not appear that God is working God’s will out, but God is. I am a big believer in Providence--not Providence, Rhode Island--but that concept that God is working out the divine will in all things. Paul says, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). Good and bad things happen to good and bad people, and God works through all these things to further the divine will of love. Notice that I did not say that God causes all things, but God works through all things to further the divine will of love.

When I think of power, I think of a story a friend of mine told several years ago about her precocious child. One time the child was making some sort of request—a cookie or something, and the parent said, “What’s the magic word?” And the child said, “Power!” That is the magic word, isn’t it? And God is redrawing the power map—in love. And because of it, my soul magnifies the Lord.

And all God’s people said, “Amen.”

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