Sermon follow up
12/7/08
Mary's Son, Mary's Song: Implications of the Incarnation
Luke 1:26-56
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There is more in these verses than I could cover in the sermon and more than I can cover even in these additional notes. I can, however, point to several very good commentaries. On Luke's gospel in general, and these verses in particular, I recommend Joel Green's commentary in the NICNT series and Art Just's commentary in the Concordia Commentary series. There are also a number of helpful studies on Mary by various authors, e.g., Scott McKnight, Scott Hahn, Jaroslav Pelikan, etc.

Just's commentary shows that 1:26-1:38 form a chiasm on p. 63. The literary structure for 1:39-45 is found on p. 75. These structures provide important hermeneutical clues, although I will not do much with them this time around.

The virgin birth is a miracle of epic proportions. The only parallels are the origin of the creation itself and the resurrection of Christ from the dead. It is a paradigmatic "new creation" event. As I said in the sermon, the modern skeptic is prone to think that ancient peoples were gullible enough to fall for such myths but in our scientific age, we now know better. But the fact is (as the story itself bears out), while Mary may not have known about X and Y chromosomes, she certainly knew where babies come from. And so this was just as hard for her to believe as it is for us today. Her question to Gabriel shows that!

The virgin birth is more than just a sign that human beings cannot create life in themselves. It is a sign that the promised seed, the messiah of God, must be given as a gift. Man cannot play his normal part in siring this child because all men are sinners and this child must be sinless. But only the Holy Spirit can conceive a sin-free child, and so he does so by forming baby Jesus out of Mary's flesh and blood. The necessity for the virgin birth is perhaps best seen in Gen. 15-17. In those chapters, God reiterates his promise of a son to Abraham, Abraham disastrously attempts to create the seed in his own strength with Hagar, and finally God provides the seed himself through Sarah. Ishmael is the son born of flesh, Isaac the son born of the Spirit.

In believing the word of the angel Mary becomes the first "Christian" in a certain sense. She is the first to believe in the reality of the incarnation. While she is

blessed to be the carrier of baby Jesus, this is obviously only a temporary role. Her ultimate blessing is not found in being his mother, but in being his disciple (cf. Lk. 8:21; 11:27-28).

The announcement of Mary's impending pregnancy fits into a literary, typological model, widely known as an "annunciation type scene" Robert Alter explores such literary conventions in his excellent study, *The Art of Biblical Narrative;* see also Just, p. 64. Such type scenes include Hagar/Gen. 16, Sarah/Gen. 18, Hannah/1 Sam. 1-2, the wife of Manoah/Jdg. 13, Isaiah/Isa. 7, and Zechariah/Lk. 1. In his commentary on 1-2 Samuel, he explains the basic features of such birth reports:

> The expected sequence of narrative motifs of the annunciation scene is: the report of the wife's barrenness (amplified by the optional motif of the fertile co-wife less loved by the husband than is the childless wife); the promise, through oracle or divine messenger or man of God, of the birth of a son; cohabitation resulting in conception and birth.

The annunciation in Luke 1 falls into this basic pattern, with the noted difference that Mary is not barren per se, but is a virgin at the time of conception. Of course, references to her virginity pull Isa. 7:14 into play, as Matthew's gospel especially shows. While Matthew makes more of the Isaiahanic link, Luke's account also includes themes from Isaiah (cf. Green, p. 85; note also that Mary's use of servant language can be connected to Isaiah's "servant songs," as Just shows on p. 86).

The announcement to Mary is both compared to and contrasted with the birth announcement to Zechariah earlier in the chapter in Green, p. 83ff. These two annunciation scenes go together and are interwoven to form one story, with Jesus as the principal figure. John will play Samuel to Jesus' David (cf. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God,* 380). Mary is told that in her child, God will fulfill the commitment he made to David (cf. 2 Sam. 7; cf. also Isa. 9:17, Dan. 7:14, etc., which are also echoed in the words of Gabriel). It is clear that Mary does not fully understand how she will bear God's Son, but she still places unreserved trust in his word. She embraces her place in the divine plan of salvation, no matter what suffering it might cost her. She is a brave-hearted woman and she willingly bears disgrace, scandal, and stigma for the sake of bringing God's Son into the world in his appointed way.

As Mary visits Elizabeth and pens the Magnificat, we find the movement of the story from *promise* to *confirmation* to *praise.* Mary is driven to reflect on God choosing her to play this central role in salvation history. God has shown favor to her, though she had no claim on him. God has raised her up from a position of

lowliness to blessedness. The pregnancy of Elizabeth confirms her own pregnancy and enables Mary to better grasp what God is doing and how the divine purpose is going to be fulfilled. The result of her fellowship time with Elizabeth (and probably lots of bible study!) is the magnificent Magnificat!

The entire scene is shot through with liturgical elements. Elizabeth "intones" her greeting to Mary (Just, p. 75f, points out this term is used in the LXX in conjunction worship before the ark of the covenant, e.g., 1 Chron. 15:28; 16:4, 5, 42) in a liturgical style. Elizabeth is able to discern the true meaning behind John's dancing movements in her womb; hence, she gives voice to John's response to Mary's child. Her speech is dripping with blessing for Mary, a fact reflected in Mary's hymnic composition (1:48). The words of Elizabeth reverse the standards of convention as the older blesses and honors the younger. The movement from Elizabeth to Mary is a step up to a higher plane of miraculous action.

Then the entire narrative pauses for us to listen in as Mary chants God's praises in her highly inter-textual hymn. In her song, she looks ahead with total certainty to what God will bring about through her Son. Of course, the rest of Luke's gospel, and indeed, the rest of the NT, spell out how Mary's prophetic song comes to realization. As Just puts it, Mary celebrates the realization that, "The entire OT hope is about to be realized…All of God's prior saving activity finds its source and culmination in Christ…Mary stands as the one through whom the fulfillment is accomplished" (p. 64). Just fills this out with several typologies: Mary as new Eve (p. 68: "As Eve contained in her womb all humanity that was doomed to sin, now Mary contains in her womb the new Adam who will father a new humanity by his grace"); Mary as Israel (p. 65, 86); Mary as church (that is, both bride and mother; p. 65f); Mary as ark of the covenant (p. 72); Mary as tabernacle (p. 76); and Mary as new Abraham (p. 87). We could also view Mary as a new Sarah and new Hannah, though Elizabeth also fits these typologies in various ways.

Green makes the point that the vocabulary of Mary's song is reflective not only of the OT, but also the surrounding context of Luke's gospel (p. 98ff). On the structure of the song, see Green, p. 99f and especially Just, p. 81. Mary uses forms of parallelism that are common in the Hebrew Scriptures. But the OT roots are not the only thing to notice. As I pointed out in the sermon, many aspects of Mary's response and song find echoes in the teaching and ministry of Jesus himself (e.g., blessing on the poor; servanthood; God exalting the lowly and opposing the proud; etc.). From beginning to end, the song emphasizes *God's*

action, not Mary's feelings or experiences. As I said in the sermon there is not a hint of Christmas sentimentalism here (e.g., "chestnuts roasting on an open fire," "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas," etc.). When Mary's Son arrives, he does not come to mess around but to "kick butt." He comes to fight and he comes to rescue. Green points out the basic motifs of the song are "God as divine warrior" and "God as savior" (p. 102).

Mary's shift from what God has done "for me" to what God has done "for Israel" is significant. Gospel-religion is both personal *and* corporate, and never one at the expense of the other. We must personally respond to God in faith (like Mary's "let it be"), but we must also join ourselves to his people (as Mary sees herself in solidarity with the covenant nation). Mary's celebration of God's redeeming work expands from "for me" to "for Israel." See Just, p. 64ff on the Mary/Israel/church connections, especially Mary as bride/mother. What God does for Mary he does for all his people. Mary is representative and paradigmatic.

In the song, Mary speaks of God "regarding" (or "looking upon") her in her "low estate." This word "regard" usually occurs in contexts where God shows free favor to his people in times of distress (e.g., 1 Sam. 1:11; 9:16; Ps. 102:12-14 in the LXX). She also speaks of God's "mighty deeds." This is language from the Psalms, e.g., 77:15-16, 89:11. *Now* God's mighty deeds will be done by the baby Mary carries in her womb. God's actions in Christ will build upon, complete, and fulfill all previous redemptive acts. Speaking of God's "arm" especially invokes the new exodus typology I referred to in the sermon. Holiness is a constant theme in the passage (cf. Hannah's song in 1 Sam. 2). The angel referred to the child in Mary's womb as holy, meaning he is the one through whom the God will be present. In Mary's song, she speaks of God's "holy name." Obviously, holiness needs to be a key motif in our Advent and Christmas observances.

The transposition/reversal motif in the song is etched throughout Luke's gospel. The gospel brings about nothing short of a social revolution, a transvaluation of values. (This aspect of the song should especially be compared to Hannah's song in 1 Sam. 2, which describes its own social earthquake.) Luther summarizes: "God is the kind of Lord who does nothing but exalt those of low degree and put down the mighty from their thrones, in short break what is whole and make whole what is broken." In short, God opposes the proud, autonomous, and self-sufficient, but gives grace to the humble and hungry. Just explains further: "Jesus is the ultimate reversal of God as the Creator come to his creation. As the Father exalted Jesus in his humility, so now Jesus will exalt those of low estate…[As

Luther says], 'Christ was powerless on the cross; and yet there he performed his mightiest work and conquered sin, death, world, hell, devil, and all evil'" (Just, p. 86).

Mary's singing of God's power should be juxtaposed with the reality that she is talking about a *baby.* The Almighty One will be found in a womb, then in a manger, and ultimately on the cross. God is coming in power, but he has clothed himself in weakness. God is coming to break his enemies, but he arrives in the very breakable body of a child. He is coming to help Israel, but he arrives as the helpless one. This is majesty and mystery of the incarnation. Tim Keller has a nice set of paradoxes to explain (I've added some of my own):

- The metaphysical has become physical
- The supernatural has become natural
- The immortal has become mortal
- The unapproachable one has approached us
- The invulnerable one has become vulnerable
- The strong one has come in utter weakness
- The helper has become helpless
- The unbreakable one has become breakable
- The one with all riches entered the world with nothing

It completely confounds our reasoning to think of the God who made and upholds all things to come among us in the form of a baby. But that's what God did! It shows us God's amazing humility and love.

In the sermon, I mentioned some examples of the "politics of the Magnificat" at work. I really do think this might be the most outlawed, controversial song in history. The weakest vessel has produced the most powerful hymn! It is the song of rebels and subversives, revolutionaries and insurgents. It has been banned by monarchs in "Enlightenment" Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries; it was banned in Guatemala and El Salvador in the 1980s by petty dictators; and colonial viceroys in India in the final days of British occupation forbade it to be sung even though it is a standard canticle in the Anglican liturgy. (In defiance of this order in India, Ghandi – by no means a Christian – requested that the Magnificat be read publicly at all those places where the British flag was being lowered on the final day of British rule. At least he had a sense of humor – and a good sense of what the Magnificat means for the oppressed!)

How do you think the rich and powerful in Mary's culture would have heard her song? The Roman elite and their Jewish collaborators would no doubt find the

song highly offensive. “Them’s fightin’ words!” we might say. Mary showed great courage, not only in accepting the call God placed upon her, but also in writing a song that exposed and challenged the principalities and powers. She knows that the Messiah will bring in God’s justice, the right-wising of the world. We might think of Mary as a shy little girl who wouldn’t hurt a flea. And maybe so. But she was also tough as nails and had incredible courage (in a feminine sort of way). She passionately stood up to tyranny and challenged oppression. If this impoverished teenage Nazarene girl could be so bold, why can’t we do the same? With Mary, let us charge the gates of hell with hymn books in hand, knowing that battle belongs to the Lord! Let us sing our way to victory and justice!

As I said in the sermon, we cannot sing the Magnificat with integrity unless we also allow ourselves to be caught up into God’s agenda for the world. The Magnificat shows us that matter *matters*. It shows us that history *matters*. It shows us that God is concerned not just with souls but with bodies, not just with a “spiritual” salvation for individuals, but with the comprehensive restoration of society. Preaching grace and doing justice are not an either/or in the worldview of the Magnificat; rather, they are part of a package deal. God’s agenda includes overturning every last effect of humanity’s fall into sin – including overturning the effects of pride, snobbery, and abuse (since Mary’s song especially takes aim at the arrogant and oppressive).

We see this all through history. Again, as I said in the sermon, Mary is not claiming God has an *unconditional* favor for the poor. If that was the case, what would happen when the rich are made poor, and the poor are filled? If wealth is leprosy, a curse, why would God give it to the poor? The point is this: God hates the prideful and in the context of this psalm, he threatens to tear them down. In this case, the rich are arrogant snobs. At the same time, he promises to exalt the lowly. When the wicked are cast down from their thrones, the thrones are not left empty; they are filled with the righteous. God’s people will, through faith, ultimately inherit all things (1 Cor. 3). Whatever the wicked possess at present is being stored up as an inheritance for us.

How do we show our solidarity with the poor, even if we are rich? By extending God’s mercy towards them. If we are kind and generous, even if we are billionaires, God will look upon as poor and side with us. We have admitted our true spiritual poverty to him, and aligned ourselves with those God favors, namely the humble, who know they need help.

God in Christ has poured himself out for the sake of the poor. Christ was rich, but gave up his riches and became poor in order to enrich the poor. Now he calls us to live out the same pattern. If we do, he blesses us; if we do not, he crushes us.

What can we say about mercy for the poor? How does it work? Where does poverty come from and what's the best thing to do about it? The fact is, resources and opportunities are not equal at birth. It is too simplistic for the rich to take credit for their wealth, patting themselves on the back for their hard work, while blaming the poor for their poverty, when they have never had the opportunity to escape it. We know natural abilities, like IQ, are gifts from God. But providential opportunities, like parents who taught you a good work ethic and gave you a solid education, are gifts as well. Many do end up in poverty through willful sin and refuse opportunities to better themselves when they come along. And we should be wary of subsidizing evil by giving gifts that are disconnected from other forms of holistic ministry. But the socioeconomics of wealth and poverty are more complex than they appear at first glance. We have to look at the capital God has made available to us – monetary capital, social capital, educational capital, relational capital, even "spiritual" capital.

The Magnificat shows us *God's holistic concern for the poor*. We can trace this theme throughout the Bible. God clothed the naked in Gen. 3. The book of Gen. ends with Joseph establishing a worldwide hunger relief program, feeding the hungry world bread. Joseph effectively counters 7 years of famine and becomes the "savior" of the world. The Mosaic law commanded Israel to not forget (that is, neglect, or ignore) the poor, but to give them opportunities and resources so they could begin to provide for themselves. The Torah imposed social responsibilities and love of neighbor on the covenant people. The prophets condemned Israel for being calloused and insensitive to the needs of the poor. The prophets accused the rich in the nation of greed and materialism and living for themselves. These practices were technically legal but they were not "just" or "merciful." The prophets declared that these economic and monetary sins were just as offensive to God as idolatry and fornication. In Jesus' ministry, we find word and deed working hand in hand. Jesus preached the good news, but also healed broken and diseased bodies. He called on his disciples to show mercy to the poor even as God had shown them mercy – and made such works of mercy the test of final salvation! Jesus often associated with the poor, the lowly, the outcast, the excluded, and raised them up, promising them restoration and giving them hope. He showed a kind of solidarity with the humble, righteous, and poor of his society. In his ministry, he embodied the message of Torah and

the prophets, showing a special concern for the needy, and a special vendetta for the powerful who exuded pride and arrogance.

The early church carried forward Jesus' holistic mission, as outlined in the Magnificat. The Christians were not social revolutionaries in the Marxist or secular sense, but they did revolutionize society. The early church was rich in good deeds, embodying a ministry of social righteousness, sharing wealth, and insisting that faith show itself in care for others. The office of diaconate was established to coordinate deed ministries to the poor inside and outside the church. The church gave the poor and marginalized a place at the table, exalting society's lowliest members. The church raised the position of women, freed slaves, and preserved the dignity of the poor.

Throughout church history, the church has been at her best when she has been fully engaged in word ministry and deed ministry, never emphasizing one at the expense of the other, but joining them together in a holistic witness to the King and his kingdom. The church has made her greatest impact on the world when people who normally wouldn't get along outside the church actually learned to get along with one another inside the covenant community. In the church there is no rich or poor, for we are all poor in ourselves and we are all rich in union with Jesus. In the church family all kinds of people groups that warred with another across racial or ethnic or socioeconomic lines bonded together and congealed together into a cohesive body with a shared faith and shared mission.

The Magnificat not only reveals God's mission – it also shows us the church's mission (which is after all, a sharing in God's mission). We are called to play a part in restoring all of life – family life, church life, business practices, politics, race relations, etc. We are called to practice righteousness (mercy + justice) in every area of life. In all that we do, our work is to be shaped by God's agenda, which aims to comprehensively heal the world of disease and brokenness brought on sin. Again, we cannot truly and rightly sing the Magnificat unless we are willing to take part in God's project of renewing all things through justice and mercy.

All of this to say: the incarnation has implications for *every* aspect of Christian living. We need to reckon with the earthiness, the "this-worldliness" of it all. The incarnation means we can enjoy and should seek to transform every aspect of God's (obviously good, redeemable) creation. The Son of God was made *flesh*. We should engage life and culture to the fullest degree.

So the Magnificat celebrates the incarnation in all its implications. Mary is showing that Jesus is coming and he's bringing heaven with him. He's coming to establish a new regime, a new social order, a new creation. But we also need to note how militant it is. The incarnation, as revealed in Mary's song, is a kind of divine invasion. Her womb serves as the beachhead. God is going to war. He's fighting against pride in high places, toppling those who oppress and persecute his people. He's fighting against sin and death, he's working to set things right, he's combating evil forces in high and low places. Mary herself is a kind of warrior; indeed all covenant mothers who bring serpent-crushing seed into the world are playing their part in God's holy war. Mary is blessed in a unique way because she's the channel through whom the Blessed One and all his blessings will flow into history. But in this she is symbolic of all covenant mothers (cf. 1 Tim. 2:15).

Mary ends her song triumphantly (1:55-56): God remembers his people and acts in mercy. He is the covenant-making God and (now) the covenant-keeping God. The word he spoke to Abraham (see Gen. 12:1-3) is now coming to fulfillment. All the nations will be blessed in Mary's baby. Mary's seed is Abraham's seed. The blessing promised back in Gen. 12 is one of peace, restoration, wholeness, and joy for the world. The family of Mary will bless all the families of the earth.

What does it mean for God to *remember*? God is a God who comes to his people. He comes to rescue them. He does so on his own timetable. But he *always* remembers. God never, ever forgets us. That's what Advent and Christmas are all about: God remembering, God coming, God rescuing, God restoring. God has remembered us, God is with us, God has come to fulfill his promises!

Luke concludes this portion of his gospel narrative by telling us that Mary stayed at Elizabeth's for 3 months, to the time of John's birth. She sees in person the child that serves as a sign and confirmation of her own miraculous pregnancy. Seeing John's birth to this aged woman is sure-fire proof that God is up to something big!

A couple of final notes: In the sermon and in this follow-up, I have developed quite a bit of Marian typology. None of that typology is the exclusive domain of Roman Catholicism. Protestant do something different with the typology Mary, but many faithful Protestants, going back to some of the reformers themselves, have acknowledged that the Bible presents Mary in a typological way. The key is to remember that many of these typologies (e.g., Mary as ark, containing the shekinah/glory of God) only persisted during the time of her pregnancy. The

Roman church has exaggerated and misused them in a way that ultimately detracts from Mary and from a proper Christology. *True Mariology* will not focus on Mary herself, but on Christology, e.g., *what Mary's role and status actually reveal about the person and work of her Son*. But I have very little interest in spending time on polemics against our brothers and sisters in the Roman church on this point in this context. I have not found any of our people drawn to Rome or to its misunderstandings of Mary's person and work. So we will leave that matter for now. If you have questions about what Rome teaches about Mary and why I could never subscribe to it, please ask me. It is interesting that Jesus relativized his connection to Mary when he put made the bonds of discipleship more foundational than the bonds of natural kinship (Lk. 8:19-21). In another place, he identified Mary's highest honor as a disciple rather than Theotokos (Lk. 11:27-28). I believe there were two reasons for this. First, Theotokos was only a temporary role for Mary. Second, her salvation was found not in bearing Jesus, but in trusting Jesus.

The ultimate way we can honor Mary is by imitating her faith and by trusting in her Son alone for salvation. We honor her when we say to God "let it be to me according to your Word" (echoing Lk. 1:38) and put into practice the things she sang about in her glorious psalm of praise. All of creation is feminine in relation to God; Mary's "yes" to God is the model creaturely response. We pay Mary the highest form of homage when conform our lives to her pattern of life and her song of kingdom justice.