



Luke 1:39-56

“An Unlikely Revolution” (4th in a series on Luke’s Gospel)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 1:39-56 "AN UNLIKELY REVOLUTION"

Mary Is Ideal Disciple/Believer/Social Paradigm

1) vv.39-40 TRAVEL REPORT: MARY'S ARRIVAL AND GREETING (Narrative). 4 Action Verbs

39 In those days **MARY AROSE AND WENT** with haste into the hill country, //1:36-38, Gabriel's Sign, 2:16
 to a city of Judah, **Makes Decisions, Obey's Sign//2:16, Takes A Missionary Pilgrimage**
 40 and she *entered* the house of Zechariah **South Of Jerusalem, 80-100 Miles From Nazareth = 3 Days**
 and *greeted* Elizabeth. **(Greeting: vv.40, 41, 44), 1:36, Zechariah Silenced! No Male Voices**

2 Women + 2 Children Experience God, Charismatic Event: Prophecy, Blessing, Portents!
A Divine Appointment Is Now Anointed
Communion And Testimony

2) vv.41-45 ELIZABETH'S PROPHETIC BLESSING OF MARY (Direct Address).

41 And when Elizabeth heard the *greeting* of Mary, **2 Trigger Events, Explosion Of God's Presence!**
 the babe (i.e. John) leaped in her womb; **Y. Sota 5.4, Portent, Prophetic Recognition, Gen. 25:22-26**
 and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, **Repeated Fillings, Prophetic Gift, 1:67, 2:27**
 42 and she exclaimed with a loud cry, **Spirit Enables Elizabeth To Interpret Events As A Prophet**

Hymn 1 a **"Blessed (eulogoumene) are you among women,**
 Blessing **and blessed is the fruit of your womb!**
2 Showstoppers, 2 Operatic Arias, Congratulations!

43 b *And why is it granted to me,* **No Power Struggle Over Sons, Reason For Blessing: Child Is Lord**
 Question **that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 1:45,76;2:11, Lord (Kyrios) As Jesus From Inception**
Ps. 110:1 [LXX], Kyrios For God, 1:6-25 (7x)

44 b' *For behold,* **John Recognizes Messianic Lord In Womb!**
 Answer **when the voice of your greeting came to my ears,**
the babe in my womb leaped for joy. Greeting (3x)
Joy, 1:14-15, 47; Gen. 25:21-23 Foreshadows Future

45 a' *And blessed (happy, makaria) is she who believed* **1:38, 11:27-28, Blessed On Both Accounts, Model Disciple**
 Blessing **that there would be a fulfillment**
of what was spoken to her from the Lord." //11:27-28, Surrender To Divine Purpose, Lord As God Of Israel
Conceived First In Heart, Then Womb, Direct Address, Language Of Intense Emotions
First Human Interpretation Of Annunciations

2') vv.46-55 MARY'S PROPHETIC POEM IN TWO STANZAS (LATIN: MAGNIFICAT).

46 And Mary said (sang a canticle?), **A. MARY PERSONALLY: BLESSED STATUS**
1:35, Acts 1:35; Elizabeth Praise Mary Who Then Praises God!

Hymn 2 A1) *"My soul magnifies the Lord,* **(Present) Praise And Its Reasons: For, Many //s Ps. Sol.**
 47 *and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,* **1 Sam. 2:1-10, Fulfills 1:14, Savior, 2:11,30,19:9, Acts 13:26**

48 A2) *for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.* **(Past) Real Social Position, 1:38**
For behold, henceforth, all generations will call me blessed; (Future) 1:45 Me/My (5x)

49 A3) *for he who is mighty has done great things for me,* **Personal Regard, Dt. 10:21**
 50 *and holy is his name.* **Shared Titles: Lord, Holy, Savior**

A4) *And his mercy is on those who fear him* **Every Verse Has O.T. Echoes**
from generation to generation. Deep Respect, Generational Legacy

B. THE LOWLY: AN UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM REVOLUTION

51 B1) *He has shown strength with his arm,* **All Past Tense! Defiance, Ex. 6:6, Anthropomorphism**
 52 *he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,* **Spiritually Arrogant, Proud/Humble**

B2) *he has put down the mighty from their thrones,* **Social Revolution/ End Time Reversal**
 53 *and exalted those of low degree;* **Series Of Warnings: Proud/Mighty/Rich**

B3) *he has filled the hungry with good things,* **Hungry/Rich, Abundant Life**
 54 *and the rich he has sent empty away.* **Self-Sufficient//Reversals Of 6:20-26**

B4) *He has helped his servant (child) Israel,* **Lit. taken by the hand**
 55 *in remembrance of his mercy,/
 as he spoke to our fathers,* **Paste Tense/ Future Actions, 8 Big Verbs**

_____ to Abraham and to his posterity for ever."// _____ For Individual & Society
Only God Can Bring Justice, Longest Female Speech In NT
Kingdom Is God's Intervention, Not Fruit/Perfection Of Human Striving

1') v.56 TRAVEL REPORT: MARY'S STAY AND DEPARTURE (Narrative).

2 Songs Like Arias In Opera, Themes Of Joy/Liberation Throughout

56 And **MARY REMAINED** with her about three months, **Prophetic Explosion, Then Three Months Of Dialog**

AND RETURNED TO HER HOME.

Back Into Anonymity, Scene Closes With Departures (1:23, 38; 2:20, 39)

LUKE 1:1-4:15

"THE PRE-PUBLIC AND EARLY CAREERS OF JOHN AND JESUS IN PARALLEL"

I. 1:1-4 RHETORICAL PREFACE OF AN ANCIENT BIOS: LAYERS OF TRADITION.

II. THE PARALLEL STORIES OF CONCEPTION, BIRTH, EARLY SERVICE.

A. 1:5-25 Annunciation To Zechariah

1. vv.5-7 Time, Characters, Lineage, Status

2. vv.8-23 Annunciation By Gabriel

a. vv.8-10 Zechariah's Service/ People Outside

b. vv.11-20 Appearance, Message, Sign

1. v.11 Angel appears

2. v.12 Fearful response

3. v.14 Angelic message (4 phrases)

4. vv.14-17 Gabriel's song proclaims
John's significance

5. v.18 Zechariah's objection

6. v.19 Angel's response/authority

v.20 "And behold," sign of dumbness

7. v.23 Departure

a' vv.21-23 People outside/ Zechariah's service

A' 1:26-38 Annunciation To Mary

1. vv.26-27 Time, Characters, Lineage, Status

2. vv.28-37 Annunciation By Gabriel

a. (No Parallel)

b. vv.28-37 Appearance, Message, Sign

1. v.28 Angel appears

2. v.29 Fearful response

3. vv.30-31 Angelic message (4 phrases)

4. vv.32-33 Gabriel's song proclaims
Jesus' significance

5. v.34 Mary's objection

6. v.35 Angel's response/ Spirit's authority

vv.36-37, "And behold," sign of Elizabeth

7. v.38 Departure

a' v.38 Promise fulfilled, Mary's response

B. 1:39-56 Visitation Of Mary & Elizabeth

1. vv.39-40 Mary's Arrival And Greeting

2. vv.41-45 John's Response, Elizabeth's Song To Mary

2' vv.46-55 Mary's Song To God In Two Stanzas

1' v.56 Mary's Stay And Departure

C. 1:57-80 Birth And Destiny Of John

John As Prophet (1:16-17, 1:76, 3:1-6)

1. (cf. 1:5 Herod)

John at home

2. v.57 Birth of John

3. v.58 Neighbors, Kinfolk Rejoice

4. vv.59-66 Circumcision, Naming of John

5. vv.67-79 Priestly prophecy concerning John
at his presentation

6. v.80a Growth of John

v.80b John in the wilderness

C' 2:1-52 Birth And Destiny Of Jesus

Jesus As Messiah/Son (1:21-33, 1:69; 1:35, 2:49)

1. vv.1-5 Historical Dating: *Caesar, Quirinius*
Holy family to Bethlehem

2. vv.6-7 Birth of Jesus

3. vv.8-20 Angels appear to shepherds
who go and rejoice with Mary

4. v.21 Circumcision, Naming of Jesus

5. vv.22-39 Priestly Prophecy Concerning Jesus
at his presentation

6. v.40 Growth of Jesus

vv.41-51 Jesus in the temple

v.52 Growth of Jesus

D. 3:1-22 Beginning Of John's Ministry

1. 3:2b John as "Son of Zechariah"

2. 3:2b John in the "wilderness"

3. 3:8 Abraham reference

3. 3:7-18 John's preaches Is. "good news"

4. 3:19-20 John rejected by Herod

D' 3:23-4:15 Beginning Of Jesus' Ministry

1. 3:23-38 Jesus as "son of Joseph," "son of God"

2. 4:1-15 Jesus in the "wilderness," "if you are Son"

3. 3:34 Abraham reference

3. 4:16-30 Jesus' preaches Is., "good news," "Joseph's son?"

4. 4:28-29 Jesus rejected by Nazareth

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 1:39-56

Reading Luke's literary map is a key to following his unfolding thought from one large unit to another. The design of 1:5-4:15 places the conceptions, births, and early ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus in parallel panels for two purposes: 1) to show their continuity in the purposes of God, and 2) to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus at every point of comparison over his older cousin. John is the greatest of the old order, but with Jesus the Son and Messiah the kingdom dawns. John serves as the *preview of coming attractions*, but Jesus is the show itself! John is a prophet; Jesus is God's unique Son.

The one exception to the pattern of parallel panels (diptychs) is the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth in 1:39-56 where the two streams merge, then separate before coming together a second time at the baptism (3:1-22). Because this meeting is a break from the pattern, it is the more significant. Two Jewish women, one past child-bearing age and one just entering that season, both of whom have pregnancies arranged by angelic visitations, meet and find their boys in utero interacting with one another. The only male present is the deaf and mute Zechariah, so this amazing scene is all about God's work at the margins of power.

The start and finish of the paragraph are marked by the coming and going of Mary: "Mary arose and went" (v.39) // "Mary remained... and returned to her home" (v.56). This is a travel narrative, and between the travel reports are two prophetic speeches, first of Elizabeth in a Spirit-guided interpretation of the portent of John flipping in her womb (vv.41-45), then Mary in Spirit-energized gratitude for God's mercy to her (Stanza 1: 46-50) and beyond her to Israel as a whole (Stanza 2: vv.51-55). Think of two operatic arias sandwiched between the comings and goings of Mary; both are showstoppers! A cast of four, and two are presently invisible. The prophetic songs are about the unfolding of God's new work that starts with two pre-borns and their unlikely moms.

Mary's obedience is immediate following the promised sign of 1:36-38 with four action verbs adding pace, "Mary *arose* and *went*... and *entered*... and *greeted*." Her first act of faith was to say Yes to God's offer; her second is to do her part to confirm the sign. That she arrives in the hill country around Jerusalem already pregnant means the promises of 1:35 are fulfilled. Jesus is now within her, less than a week into fetal development. At Mary's greeting John the Baptist- now six months into development- cuts a somersault. At his leap the Holy Spirit wells up within Elizabeth so she is able to rightly interpret events. Her poetic oracle opens and closes with *Blessed* (v.42b//v.45), the first a congratulations to Mary for the new status Jesus brings, the second for her faith in God's word. In between are a question (v.43) and an answer (v.44) which not only names Jesus as *Lord* but shows John's joyful deference. Mystery needs prophecy! Elizabeth title for Jesus, *Lord*, is the Old Testament word for God (Greek *kurios*).

Luke does not say Mary was also filled with the Spirit, but it is presumed. Her prophetic oracle is a hymn (Latin *Magnificat*), first of praise for what God has done *for her* (vv.46-50), then a catalog of what God will do for *all her tribe* (vv.51-55). So sure are God's promises that Mary stands in the future and looks back on their fulfillment. This is why all the verb tenses of vv.51-55 are in the past. She speaks of a new future as if done. Each of the two stanzas has four two-line couplets with key terminology repeated in a parallel fashion (*low estate // low degree, mercy // mercy, from generation to generation // to Abraham and his posterity for ever*). What God did for Mary, which was lift up a humble girl to the heights by calling her be a participant in the coming of the Savior, this same thing God will do when the tables are turned on all history so that those who were crushed are now on top, not so that they may be the new bosses *sticking it to the man*, but that those who looked up to God are rewarded, while those who looked down

on others are humbled. Mary’s stay ends just before John’s birth, and she goes home to Nazareth.

AN UNLIKELY REVOLUTION

“He has put down the mighty from their thrones.”

The Spirit-filled prophet Mary on the coming of the kingdom of God.

LUKE 1 : 5 2

We don’t know when Jesus was born. No birth certificates, no Social Security cards. The births of Roman Emperors were inscribed in stone and celebrated in inscriptions, not Jewish babies in backwoods Palestine.¹ We know *where*-Bethlehem, then Nazareth- but not *when*. Our best guess is a window between 4 and 6B.C.² near the end of King Herod’s reign, but the time of year is uncertain. Jesus died in his early-to-mid-thirties. The gospel writers, who presumably could have found out through members of Jesus’ family, did not, or- if they did- did not write it down. What mattered most was his identity- *his person*, and what he accomplished in life and death- *his work*, how his resurrection is a window in the world’s future, not the precise date of birth. Our Christian forebears had other concerns, more Who? and Why? than When? It is a mistake to make our concerns theirs. The four gospels tell us what we need to have a healed relationship with God. Our modern curiosities will have to wait. When you have thirty feet of papyrus instead of an eight hundred page modern biography, you have to be highly selective.

In his book *God Came Near* Max Lucado does a clever job of demonstrating how many of the things we want to know are absent. He titles his thoughts *25 Questions for Mary*. His mistake is to assume that Jesus as a boy was fully aware of the fullness of his identity, but the questions are still worth reading, so I’ve selected twelve:

- “What was it like watching him pray?
- How did he respond when kids giggled during the synagogue service?
- When he saw a lamb being led to the slaughter, did he act differently?

¹ See Appendix I on the *Priene inscription*.

² For a discussion, see Ben Witherington, *New Testament History: A Narrative Account* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), Chapter 3, “The Rise of the Herodians, the Birth of Jesus, and the Dawn of an Empire (63-4B.C.),” 49-80.

How did he act at funerals? Did he ever come home with a black eye?
Did he have any friends by the name of Judas?
Did he do well in school? Did you ever scold him?
What did he think when he saw a prostitute misusing a body he made?
Did he ever get angry when someone was dishonest with him?
When someone referred to Satan, how did he act?
Did you ever think, That's God eating my soup?"³

It was only in the 2nd and 3rd centuries that Christians began to speculate about the date of birth. Since Jesus was titled *Lord* in contrast to the Emperor, many thought his birthday should also be remembered.⁴ Bishop Clement of Alexandria favored May 20 but knew of others who chose April 18, 19, or May 28. Hippolytus, bishop of Rome late in the second century, favored January 2. November 17 and 20, as well as March 25 all had backers. One claimed March 21 because it was believed that on that day God created the sun. Some chose January 6, the Feast of Epiphany which celebrated the arrival of the magi. But the precise date was forgotten. The Apostle Paul writes in Galatians, "But *when the time had fully come*, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman...."⁵ Christ came, Paul said, in God's perfect time, whatever the date. What mattered was good theology, not precise chronology.

Amnesia on this issue was providential because it forced the church to make a choice. What do you do when people clamor for a day to honor Jesus' birthday? His new birth from the dead is Easter, and we celebrate that, but what about his bio-birth? The answer is brilliant; you take a cluster of late December Roman celebrations and baptize them! December 25th already hosted two pagan festivals, the birthday of Mithras- the Iranian sun god popular with Roman soldiers, and one called *natalis solis invicti*, "the birth of the unconquered sun," which is only four days after the winter solstice. One solar year is dying; another about to stretch itself out, so the church marketing department took full advantage. In the face of false gods, you name the true one and start a new tradition. That's how we got December 25th. It was a choice based pastoral and evangelism concerns, not historical ones, and if that bothers you, I'm sorry. We don't understand Jesus if we know *when* he was born, only *why*! One writer said, "Seeing that pagans were already exalting deities with some parallels to the true deity, church leaders decided to commandeer the date and introduce a

³ www.heart4teens.com/teen122005.

⁴ The best current treatment of Luke's use of imperial rhetoric as applied to Jesus is Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2007), Chapter 6, "In David's City of Bethlehem," 129-170.

⁵ 4:4.

new festival.”⁶ It was a bold move that stuck.

It didn't hurt that Emperor Constantine converted and that his successor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. The day now had government sanction, and it was in 336 A.D. that the initial celebration was put on the calendar. There was a time when Christmas was a new thing! Because of disagreements between the older Julian and newer Gregorian calendars, some churches in the East still celebrate January 6 or 7, but for most December 25 is the world-wide day for Christmas. It was a brilliant move. Churches were built atop pagan shrines to give old holy places new meanings, and old holidays were taken captive for Jesus Christ, God the Son.

As for the name, it comes from the 11th century. *Christmas* is a shorted form of *the mass of Christ (Christ-mass)*, the communion service celebrated that day. It was one of the most popular holidays (originally *holy-days*) in the Middle Ages. The manger scene or creche was introduced on Christmas Eve in 1223 by Francis of Assisi to demonstrate the humility of Jesus for the people of Greccio, Italy who gathered with oxen and sheep and donkeys to begin what would become a world wide tradition based on Italian rural depictions rather than first century ones. A manger in Jesus' time was not a free-standing trough but a niche cut into a wall at the height of an animal's head.⁷ The barn in Jesus' day was not a shed behind the house but the bottom floor of a Palestinian home where livestock was kept at night. St. Francis got the architecture wrong but the spirit right, so who cares?

But with the anti-Roman Catholic themes of the Protestant Reformation, Christmas again became controversial. Arguments were made the celebration was unscriptural. Later on, the celebration was altogether banned in some Protestant countries as an example of what was then called *popery*. In New England, with its Puritan roots, Christmas was officially outlawed till the mid-19th century, and in Boston school was held on Christmas Day till 1870.

It was the mass influx of Irish and German immigrants late in the century that returned Christmas to New England and thus to the rest of the country, though in the South things had not been so strict.⁸ But it was Clement Moore's poem *Twas The Night Before Christmas* in

⁶ See Eleisha Coffman, "Why December 25?" *Christian History Magazine Newsletter*, December 8, 2000. Two recent popular treatments are Joseph F. Kelly, *The Birth of Jesus According to the Gospels* (Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2008) and his *The Origins of Christmas* (Liturgical Press, 2004).

⁷ worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/kenneth-e-bailey-on-jesus-through-middle-eastern-eyes.

⁸ *Religious Holidays and Calendars: An Encyclopedic Handbook*, 1993.

1822 that fueled the modern Santa craze which has since spread round the world due to the illustrations of Thomas Nast and the marketing genius of Coca-Cola. Christmas as we know it is only a little more than a hundred years old. With the emergence of political correctness, the church now has to fight for a reminder of whose birthday it is. Every Christian wedding between a man and a woman is now a powerful witness to God’s creation design, and every *Merry Christmas* is an invitation to discuss the reason for the season.

What we call *The Christmas Story* is usually Luke chapter 2, verses 1 through 20 or 21. What is often neglected are *the stories before the story*, the way Luke leads up to the birth through careful preparation. Today’s text is one of those preparation stories.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

I find myself an awkward observer to today’s story, like the feeling I get when I walk into a beauty parlor or the lingerie department at Belks. Here the rules are different! It’s all about two Jewish peasant women, one too old to have a baby, the other just old enough. They are cousins, unimportant to everyone who was thought important. But when they come together by divine appointment because of the sons they carry, there is an explosion of charismatic phenomena:

- 1) pre-born children interact;
- 2) first Elizabeth, then Mary, is filled with the Holy Spirit;
- 3) two women prophets sing of God’s coming revolution.

What we have before us are two first-time mothers who put their bodies on the line so God might have a way to bring John and Jesus onto the stage. The last of the old regime with John the prophet, the beginning of a new world in Jesus Christ. In this story we mark the shift of the ages and the beginning of the end times. As a male I often feel uncomfortable when I enter a room of only women. Girl talk stops; they look at me as if to say, “What are *you* doing *here*?” Oops! That’s how I feel about today’s story. At best I am a polite outsider.

In case you’ve forgotten what comes just before, the old priest Zechariah has been struck deaf and dumb for six months for the sin of clerical unbelief. He’s a deaf-mute until John is born and named. This scene is girl-talk God-style, and it is deeply theological and highly political at the same time. A maid and a matron meet for a testimony meeting. Elizabeth’s righteous boy will lose his head to a dancing girl; Mary’s sinless son will lose his life to expose the sins of the world. The butcher’s block and the wood of the cross are three decades ahead. Here are the mothers of Jewish martyrs. Here creaks the bloody and brutal hinge on which history swings from one age to the next. And it is announced not in Rome- the seat of imperial power, not in Jerusalem- the home of Jewish temple piety, but in a village with a forgotten name. God does his best work in secrecy, in little places.

1-2) vv.39-45 Elizabeth’s Prophetic Blessing.

Mary, some have said- including yours truly, is her son’s first disciple. As a Jewish mystic she is open to visitations from angels and enveloped in the creative powers of the Holy Spirit; she welcomes the Messiah into her body and soul; she is obedient by acting on the sign Gabriel offered, verses 39 and 40, “In those days Mary *arose* and *went with haste* into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she *entered* the house of Zechariah and *greeted* Elizabeth.” No mention of Joseph or her father; here is a young woman of action!

Here faith and action are joined. If an *apostle* is one sent, then Mary is not only her son’s first disciple but his first apostle, one who literally carries Christ within her to another part of the country. It was a holy pilgrimage, a teenage girl on assignment from God. An angel comes so that the Spirit can come so that Christ can come and a sign be given that sets Mary off on a mission so the Spirit can come again as women meet and babies leap and mothers prophesy to one another of an unlikely revolution. Lots of phenomena here.⁹

A second item to note is the gift of the Spirit known as prophecy. The filling of the Holy Spirit can have many effects; one of them is that people are empowered to speak for God in a more direct way than normal. I weekly speak from Scripture as a teacher and preacher, but when the Spirit stirs the gift of prophecy the church knows intuitively that God is speaking more directly. Teaching becomes address. This stuff makes most Methodists nervous because it can’t be printed in the bulletin, but it is thoroughly biblical. In this church are latent prophetic gifts. Some of you have heard from God and are frightened to speak because of your training that God only speaks through ministers and because of the fear of being thought strange. What we have here is a divine appointment that involves two women, two unborn children, and the Holy Spirit landing on the whole bunch in spiritual gifts.

At the sound of Mary’s voice a wave of divine presence invades Elizabeth. Consciousness shifts. Electricity is always in the church; the building is wired for it, but when the switch is flicked, lights comes on. God is always present- omnipresent- in the background, but at times- with the flip of a switch we can’t see, the world is illumined. Some speak of being baptized or immersed in the Spirit, others of being filled or illumined.¹⁰ It is a repeatable visitation of the Holy Spirit that transforms awareness, and it can happen at any

⁹ For a defense of sign and wonders in our day against secular and dispensational theologies, see Jack Deere, *Surprised By The Power Of The Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993).

¹⁰ On the diversity of the Spirit’s work in Luke-Acts, see Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 8.

time. Elizabeth was engulfed in the presence and erupted in a prophetic blessing. She knew things she didn't know only a moment before. She announces divine revelation through the word of knowledge.¹¹ God will sometimes reveal to you another's secrets, and when you share it, everyone has the impression Jesus is in the room!

One of the prime functions of prophecy is to bless people. Prophecy may on occasion predict; it often corrects and warns, but a primary purpose is to affirm persons in their obedience to God.¹² Verse 42, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." What Elizabeth knows did not come from any human source. It came from God to Elizabeth for Mary. Prophets often have the experience of listening to themselves speak words they did not plan. If you've ever been the recipient of such a prophecy- as I have, you know how powerful they can be, like getting a text message from the Almighty! Would that God would stir up in this church the gift of prophecy, the gift to see deeply into another's life and to call it forth for celebration.

So not only has it been revealed that Mary is with child, Elizabeth knows this child is her Lord as well. But before she knows, the prenatal John knows and does a flip in her womb. Elizabeth is thus the third disciple of Jesus after his mother Mary and John in her belly: verse 43, "And why is it granted to me, that the mother of *my Lord* should come to me?" Not only is Elizabeth submitted to the pre-born Jesus, so is her son who leapt with joy at the presence of his Lord: verse 44, "For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy."

Everyone in the scene is acknowledging the lordship of the embryotic Jesus who is not treated as a potential person but as a person with potential, so beware of all attempts to minimize or neglect the personhood of the pre-born; it is a philosophical and theological slight of hand with disastrous results. Not a *product of conception*; not an *it* but a *who*, a human embryo, one the Holy Spirit can touch. Personhood goes along with basic humanity and human rights across the whole life span. You have to downgrade a person before they become disposable, and that is precisely what we have done as a culture the last forty years. The Roman Catholics are right here. They have such a history honoring Jesus and his mother that they cannot imagine him being done away with as a *problem pregnancy*. There's a reason many women in Charleston preferred being delivered at St. Francis hospital. They were honored and cared for by a staff that believed mommas and babies matter. All those

¹¹ For the testimony of a seasoned practitioner, see Randy Clark, *Words of Knowledge* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Global Awakening, 2011).

¹² 1 Cor. 14:3, "... he who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation."

Madonna and child pictures make a difference in conscience and outlook.

To think of it, you are I are genuinely human but not yet fully human; that happens only in the resurrection of the dead when all our created capacities are redeemed and let loose. What embryos are to us, that we are to our own resurrection future. They have not yet passed through the birth canal opening into this world, and we have not yet passed through the corridor of death that opens into the broad realities of the world to come. So when you find yourself agreeing with our pro-promiscuity, pro-death and pro-convenience culture, remember this passage and pray for courage to speak out with truth and with mercy. There are lots of women and men out there with something heavy on their consciences.

Elizabeth’s speech concludes in verse 45 with a second blessing, this time upon Mary’s obedient faith, “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” Mary hears the Word of God and obeys. She is a good evangelical, a Bible-believer and a Bible-obeyer. She is a model disciple, her Son’s first follower and his first apostle. She is also an evangelist who sparks the faith of John and Elizabeth. Quite a package, isn’t she? Disciple, apostle, pilgrim, evangelist, holy adventurer, charismatic prophet, social reformer. And you think the faith is boring! Try obeying Jesus for one single day and watch what happens! Life will become a high-stakes drama. You will move to the front lines where the fire is live!

Important things happened that day in the centers of world power. Ceremonies in the Jerusalem temple, decisions of state in the Roman Senate. Armies marched, contracts were signed, fortunes earned and lost. Famous men and women died. But God’s attention was on two peasant women whose boys would change the world. With stories like this, how could the church across history ever put the gag on women and treat them as second-class citizens instead of full partners in the work of God? They were the first disciples and apostles and prophets and evangelists, here at the birth and later at the empty tomb. So let us be a church where men and women enjoy a rich partnership and where children, even before birth, are seen as recipients of divine grace. Despite our neglect of evangelism and missions, despite our habit of siding with whatever is trendy in the culture, the Methodists are right here, so let’s rejoice in a church where men and women- delightfully different as we are- are full and equal partners in the life of the church.

2'-1') vv.46-55 Mary’s Prophetic Oracle.

Luke does not repeat that Mary was also filled with the Holy Spirit; he implies it by having Mary respond to Elizabeth with her own inspired speech. In Latin it’s known as the *Magnificat* from its first words. It is not uncommon in our day for prophetic words to come forth in the elevated language, even to be sung. Language in both its content and beauty is important to God. Cheapening language and using it to conceal and deceive rather than

reveal and illumine is a great sin. Beware of the abuse of words, and if you are able, make them both true and beautiful, just like Mary. Ugly is no credit to God, neither is stupid.

The first half of Mary’s hymn is a celebration of her recent encounter with God at the conception of Jesus by the Spirit.¹³ Her whole being has found a new joyful focus, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Before he was just the God of Israel, but now her relationship with the Holy One is intensely personal. She has done business with this God, verse 48: “for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.” Mary is now Messiah’s momma! God’s blessing is God’s power to open up a new and creative future for her, or for you and me!

This is what fresh religious experience does for people. They sing in the car. It is not just God *up there* or *out there* but *in here*, addressing me personally, verse 49, “...for he who is mighty has done great things *for me*, and holy is his name.” Mary is ecstatic in the technical sense; she stands outside herself and by the power of the Spirit speaks. Mary is a mystic: seeing angels, conceiving by the Spirit, on a mission to confirm a promised sign, bearing Christ, receiving and announcing prophecies as a young teenager. Yet even in the midst of this personal revelation Mary speaks the truth that she is no loner but in solidarity with all her people who fear God, verse 50, “And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.” She affirms the communion of the saints across the ages. So as you take out your china Madonnas and manger scenes, remember who you’re dealing with, a radical teenager who dealt with God with an intensity few have ever known.¹⁴

Some wish that Mary had stopped with stanza one, that she had not gone from personal praise to social prophet. With confidence she announces God’s coming judgment on all power and economic relationships that keep some people locked in poverty and disease and hunger. True prophecy is always a God-given protest against the way things are in the world. Our second United Methodist baptismal vow is a call to join Mary in her protest. “Do you accept,” it asks, “the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?”¹⁵ Do you? Tell me about it.

On one side of Stanza No. 2 are the proud, the mighty, the well-fed and the rich. And at the other end of the long table of life are the humble, the powerless, the hungry, the poor and the exploited. God loves both, but God must side with one if there is to be justice. So

¹³ 1:26-38.

¹⁴ For a history of Mary in theology, history, art and piety, see Jaroslav Pelican, *Mary Through the Centuries* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ *U.M. Hymnal*, 40.

Luke 1:39-56 13

Mary prophesies that the proud will be scattered, the mighty deposed from their thrones and the rich and full sent empty away. Why? Because they did not help their brothers and sisters until God flipped history over and put the bottom on top. Then it was too late. They looked down on others because they had forgotten to look up to God, and those who do not look up to God will one day find themselves on their knees looking up into the faces of those whose lives they made more difficult than they had to be.

If Mary were here today she would prophesy against the residual racism in mine and your hearts; she would want to know why we give to the poor but find so few of them worshiping with us and eating at our tables; she would want to know whether our lust for wealth and leisure have indeed brought us peace, and she would want to know why so little of our giving goes to missions to spread the name of her Son around the globe. She would remind us that it is only in solidarity with God’s people that the promises of God will find fulfillment, verses 54 and 55, “He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.”

Who is Mary? Mary is a dangerous, brassy, sassy, assertive, teenage, traveling Jewish prophetess who asks me where I want to be when God turns history upside down and inside out. The Blessed Mother, the Holy Virgin, the one we so often paint in pastel hues as meek and mild is a radical who puts all forms of power and domination under the inspection of the one who regarded her low estate.

It was the early Methodists who evangelized the poor of England and America. Where did we lose our passion for evangelism and mission that starts at the bottom? When did we become so upwardly mobile we forgot our humble roots? Where did we get comfortable with the neat divisions of the world as it is? When did we turn our preachers from passionate prophets into promoters of sentimental piety? We have tried to domesticate her, but Mary will not be tamed. She is as wild and free as the Son she carries.

In the church we love to divide up what God has put together, but in Mary we see the parts of the puzzle reassembled into a dazzling whole. Mary is an evangelical pietist with a personal, datable religious experience of God’s grace that involved inviting Christ into her life. She is rooted in Scripture and speaks of the promises of God. Mary is also a contemplative mystic who dialogs with angels and offers prayers of surrender.

Mary is a full blown charismatic and Pentecostal, baptized in the Holy Spirit and showing forth the spiritual gift of prophecy. Mary is also a missionary apostle taking Christ to another place. Mary is a social radical who names false uses of power and warns of God’s coming judgment and those who ignore the poor. Mary is also a woman who lives in

community and receives the blessing and counsel of older believers, in this case Elizabeth.¹⁶ Mary is a woman of holy leisure with three months to hang-out with Elizabeth and marvel at God’s work. Mary is cross-generational, not just concerned about her own time but about the long haul *from generation to generation*, not a short but a long term thinker.

And finally, Mary is one who lives with the extraordinary and the ordinary, knowing both are under the providence of God. So our scene ends, not with more spiritual fireworks but with three months of two women living together, waiting and tending to whatever chores there were to keep life going in a Judean village, verse 56: “And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her home.” Three months of girl stuff, and old Zechariah deaf and mute the whole time! Maybe they went and got their nails done, bought a cute outfit, sipped a latte. And there sits old Zack silent in the corner while two women chatter for three months! Such is God’s creative wrath!

CONCLUSION

Please! I warn you. Take extreme caution as you unpack your manger scenes. Exposure to Mary can be dangerous. You might get a visit from an angel. You might have to say Yes to something that would change your life. You might have to take a mission trip. You might be filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesy or speak in tongues. You might be called to protect the unborn. You might find Christ demanding expression as he stretches your faith as much as he stretched her pubescent abdomen and left stretch marks. You might have to obey God in some risky venture. You might catch such a glimpse of the kingdom of God as to make you conclude that upward mobility may not be such a good deal at all.

We should handle Mary as we would handle dynamite with the fuse lit, because if she was ever to go off in the church, things would never be the same. And if you’ve ever wondered why Roman Catholics do so much good work with the poor, why their hospitals do such good work with maternal and infant care, why their bishops continue to prick the consciences of politicians on abortion, it’s that they’ve spent a long time with Mary. Her prophecies seeped deep into their bones. Handle her with great care, and if you don’t intend to follow her as she follows Jesus, why not have the integrity just to leave her out of your manger scene this year. Such a little trouble-maker, and the one to whom she gave life is even worse! Following them is not a way to fit in with the trends and fashions of the world.

Phil Thrailkill, Main Street UMC, December 23, 2012

¹⁶ For an excellent treatment of the various great streams of the Christian tradition (contemplative, holiness, charismatic, social justice, evangelical, sacramental), see Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1998).

Appendix I

Prience Inscription, Augustus Caesar As World Savior, 9 B.C., Birthday Inscription:

“Providence... has brought into the world Augustus and filled him with a hero’s soul for the benefit of mankind. A Savior for us and our descendants, he will make wars cease and order all things well. The epiphany of Caesar has brought to fulfillment past hopes and dreams.”

Myra Inscription:

to the “divine Augustus Caesar, son of a god, imperator of land and sea, the benefactor and savior of the whole world.”

Note that each of the underlined terms has a parallel in Luke 2:1-21! Luke deliberately borrows from Imperial theology and ideology to announce the world’s rightful ruler!

Thus, there is proclaimed on the birthday of Caesar (and in other inscriptions) the he fulfills ancient hopes, is the focus of divine Providence, is son of God, as *Augustus* is worthy of worship, is titled *Savior*, has an epiphany or manifestation, and brings peace to all the world as the benefactor of all. His birthday (Sept. 23) was later made the beginning of the new year.

Luke believes that such claims about Augustus are idolatrous, but in Jesus they are true. Each claims to bring a “gospel of about the creation of a peaceful world.” Their means of doing it are not the same. One through violence and victory, the other through justice and the inbreaking power of God’s kingdom. Jesus gave non-violent resistance. They are rival political and religious claims, then and now. Hitler is not Feuhr (leader); Jesus is!

If, as the cross was leading the procession one Sunday morning, the organ was to play *Hail to the Chief*, it would have the same disturbing effect as Luke’s birth story did on its original hearers. The gospel has always been a political statement. We are not headed towards *the democracy of God* but towards *the kingdom of God*.



Questions For Study and Reflection

1:39-40

1. How is Mary's rapid obedience a further sign of her robust faith? On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 as low and 5 as rapid, how quick are you to take risks to obey the Lord?
2. How did Mary make the 80-100 mile trip apparently alone? Who many days did it take?

1:41-45

3. How did John- inside Elizabeth- respond to the Jesus inside Mary? What does this tell you about the relationship of embryos to God?
4. What did God do in Elizabeth when John cut a flip? Can women get loud in church?

1:46-55

5. The first stanza of Mary's inspired song is about what God has done for her? If you wrote a song about your relationship with God, what would be the title?
6. Mary's second stanza is highly political, about the new arrangements God has in store. Why do we have such trouble holding faith and social responsibility together?

1:56

7. With all that's going on, how can Mary and Elizabeth just hang out together for 3 months?

A Prayer Based on Luke 1:39-56

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.** Let us pray:

**Holy and Almighty God, our Heavenly Father,
you are not impressed with the pretensions of our world,
and you delight to use the humble and ignored to carry out your plans.
Your patience is stronger than all our hurried dreams.
You change the earth by bringing forth faithful witnesses and martyrs.
We thank you for the prophet John and his faithful mother Elizabeth,
and for our Lord Jesus and his adventuresome mother Mary,
who quickly obeyed your Word and boldly declared your justice.
Send upon us now the same Holy Spirit that illumined these holy women
and stirred their sons even in the womb,
that as the Scriptures are read and the Word proclaimed
we may see your world and ourselves through new eyes,
eyes that do not look down on others but up to you in awe and reverence.
And when your good kingdom comes in glory to set all things right again,
may we be not found among those who are crushed in judgment
but among those who have lived in love and obedience and service.
Save us, O Lord, from missing your call in the lives of the poor and lonely. Amen.**
