

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fourth Sunday of Advent - Year C

94th Sunday of Pandemic - Masked Service

Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:46b-55

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-45[46-55]

12/19/2021

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

39In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." [46And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich

away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

The Gospel of Our Lord.

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Mary's Song

Good morning! Today is somewhat special for me. That's because we get the joy of hearing one of my all time favorite pieces of Gospel scripture. Not only do we hear it in scripture, but this 2,000 year old piece of text is also a part of my all time favorite hymn, the *Canticle of the Turning*. Not only is it absolutely beautiful, but it's theologically perfect. We sang it at my ordination and we'll sing it at my funeral. Well, I won't... but everyone else will! It was written in 1952 by Rory Cooney and is a paraphrase of our Gospel lesson. Cooney said that he “*simply wanted to write a setting of the canticle that attempted to capture the revolutionary spirit of the gospel, of a God who 'pulls down the mighty from their thrones and raises up the lowly.*”¹ While the text is from Cooney, the music is much older and is from an old Irish tune.²

Which brings me to my question for you today: What's your favorite hymn? Why? In fact, I'll give you a minute to fill out the brief form going around now so you can answer just that. When you're done, just put it in the offering plates on your way out of worship.

(Pause for people to answer question)

¹ Westermeyer, Paul. *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2010. p. 580.

² Ibid.

You might know our Gospel lesson by a different name, the Magnificat. It has a few names, Mary's Song, the Canticle of Mary, and in the Orthodox church, the Ode of the *Theotokos*. In Greek *Theotokos* is an ancient name for Mary which means "God-bearer." But of all the names, it's most commonly known by the Magnificat, which is Latin for "my soul magnifies the Lord." (Side note: in the church we often name things by their first word in Latin. For example, the encyclicals by the Pope are all titled after their first phrase in Latin. The last encyclical by Pope John Paul II was titled "*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*," or the "Church of the Eucharist.")

The Magnificat is one of four ancient canticles taken from the Gospel of Luke. In case you are wondering, a canticle is just a hymn with lyrics taken from a biblical text. You might be familiar with all four of them. The Benedictus is spoken by Zechariah and based on Luke 1:68-79, "*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them...*" The Gloria in Excelsis Deo is spoken by the angels in Luke 2:13-14, "*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!*" Finally, the Nunc Dimittis is spoken by Simeon in Luke 2:28-32, *29"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; 30for my eyes have seen your salvation, 31which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."* (I like that one, so I read the whole thing!) See! While you might not recognize the fancy Latin titles, you know the songs!

I wasn't kidding when I said these were old. When we read or sing the Magnificat we're looking at something that is undoubtedly one of the oldest Christian hymns! How cool is that?! Every time we say those words we are joined together with voices from hundreds of different languages

spoken for 2,000 years by people of every geographical location. Sometimes the church can get bogged down by tradition, but this is definitely not one of those times!

Traditionally, the Magnificat is sung or spoken during the evening vespers service. If you ever tuned into the Facebook Live services that I did on Wednesday evenings at the beginning of the pandemic, you might remember that it made a regular appearance. And it's not just the Lutherans who use it during daily prayer services. We see it used by the Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox, the Anglicans, and some Methodists.

One scholar writes that it remains *“important in liturgy as a witness both to the special significance of Mary and to God’s active concern for the oppressed and deprived... [It] has a personal part and a societal part. A common theme unites them: the mighty God’s exaltation of the lowly.”*³ It’s this work of salvation that has always drawn me to the text. But here’s the tricky thing, O. Wesley Allen, Jr. writes that *“Luke shapes the Magnificat by having Mary speak of God’s actions in the past tense: God **looked, did** great things for me, **showed** strength, **scattered** the proud, **brought down** the powerful, **lifted** up the lowly, **filled** the hungry, **sent** the rich away empty, and **helped** Israel (verses 48–54). Note that modern English translations render the verbs in the perfect tense (for example, “has looked”) implying an action in the past that continues on into the present. But the Greek verbs are all aorist, indicating actions completely completed in the past. Thus, we see that the Magnificat is a paradoxical prophecy. It speaks of [what] a future God will bring in through the*

³ Sakenfeld, Katherine D. *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Volume 3.* Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006. p. 770.

yet-to-be-born messiah using past tense verbs. There is a sense, then, in which Luke is proclaiming that already at the point of awaiting the coming of the messiah, salvation is a done deal.”⁴

Because Christianity has been such a part of our lives, we can often forget how easy it is to sterilize the radical nature of what God has done, is doing, and will do. In this season of expectation, let us never forget the words of Mary’s Song, words of hope in a God who is changing the world, words of justice and salvation. So, *“Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.”⁵* Amen.

⁴<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-139-45-46-55-5>

⁵ Cooney, Rory B. *Canticle of the Turning*. 1952. (No. 723) in *Evangelical Lutheran Book of Worship*. Minneapolis, MN. Augsburg Fortress.