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Mary, Mother of Our Lord

Our Saviour Lutheran Church
August 15, 2021

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, I want to begin this sermon by talking about an insight I had while working on my doctoral dissertation.

I want to share with you an important learning I had during my studies.

I share this insight, this learning, with you today because it relates closely to our gospel lesson from Luke.

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Now, this gospel lesson, which we just heard, contains the song Mary sang when she visited her cousin Elizabeth.

The song leaps from Mary's lips when Elizabeth greets Mary.

Elizabeth greets Mary, telling Mary that Mary is blessed because Mary believed the message of Gabriel that Mary would conceive and bear a son.

Elizabeth greets Mary with high praise, and Mary then responds by launching into song, a song we know as the Magnificat.

PAUSE

And this song describes a reversal of fortune for the "Have's" and the "Have Not's".

Mary sings these words, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly."

"God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

This song describes a reversal of fortune.

And the introduction to our gospel reading...

That introduction to our gospel reading as found in our Celebrate insert...

The introduction states that “Mary’s song, the Magnificat, serves as a thematic anthem for God’s work in the world.”

The Magnificat serves as a thematic anthem for God’s work in the world.

An interesting aside, the pagan festival in the Roman world known as Saturnalia, celebrated in December, was of particular significance for slaves, because it was the one day of the year in which slaves could change places with their masters, such that the lowly were lifted up.

And perhaps it was this Saturnalian tradition of exchanging roles that had some bearing on Christians.

Whatever the case, the Magnificat, and its message of the reversal of fortune, serves, as we said, as a thematic anthem for God’s work in the world, so says our gospel introduction.

That assessment of the Magnificat is spot on.

The Magnificat sets the tone for God’s work in the world.

And it seems fitting that the Magnificat would set the tone for God’s work in the world, because the Magnificat is the opening song in Luke’s gospel.

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You see, Luke’s gospel is filled with singing, more so than the other gospels, more so than Matthew, Mark, and John.

Mary sings the Magnificat.

And then in Luke’s gospel, Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, sings the Benedictus.

And then the angels sing the Gloria to the shepherds who are keeping watch over their flocks by night.

And then Simeon who meets Jesus and his parents at the temple sings the Nunc Dimittis.

It is a regular hit parade in the first few chapters of Luke: Magnificat, Benedictus, Gloria, Nunc Dimittis.

It is like something from Casey Kasem's top 40 countdown, which I guess is hosted now by Ryan Seacrest.

PAUSE

The point being in Luke's gospel the Magnificat tops the charts and sets the tone of God's work in the world.

And again, God's work entails a reversal of fortune, the powerful are humbled, and the lowly are lifted up.

Now, with respect to my doctoral studies what I learned is this.

God's work in the world, God's vision for the world is a little more involved than just the reversal of fortune.

You see, as I was working on my dissertation, it was keenly brought to my attention the pyramidal, hierarchical structure of Roman society.

You see, during the early church, during Jesus's ministry and the ministry of the apostles, during the advent of Christianity, the Roman world in which the church emerged, was set up as a hierarchical pyramid.

The Roman Emperor resided at the pinnacle of the pyramid.

And under the Emperor were stratified layers.

And in each successive layer of the pyramid more and more people resided.

But in each lower layers, those persons lived a more precarious existence.

So you had the emperor, and the political elites under him, and then Roman citizens, and then non-citizens, and at the very bottom were the slaves.

The Have's and the Have Not's in Roman society were based on a somewhat scaled system.

Indeed, there was this stratified pyramidal hierarchical structure.

And it was not such that Christianity envisioned those in high positions being brought low, and those in the lowly places being elevated to high places.

It was not such that Christianity envisioned a simple reversal of fortune.

That is the general idea, but in truth, Christianity's vision of reality was more complicated than that.

Christianity saw Jesus, who was born in human likeness, and who took the position of a slave, the lowest position of all, a slave who died on a cross...

Christianity envisioned Jesus as the one who humbled himself, becoming in turn highly exalted by God.

Yes, in the person of Jesus Christ there is a definite reversal of fortune.

And because Jesus now resides at the pinnacle of the pyramid...

Because Jesus is exalted, so as to be at the right hand of God...

Because Jesus is Lord, every person is of equal status before God.

The powerful are brought down from their thrones. The lowly are lifted up.

So, there is a something of a reversal of fortune, but it is such that every person stands on an equal plain. Jesus Christ is the great equalizing force.

And, this...THIS is how the early church saw the reality around them.

This is the great learning I had from my doctoral studies.

It is as the apostle Paul says, "In Christ, there is neither, slave nor free, male nor female, Gentile or Jew." In Christ, all people are equal.

And the early Church highlighted this alternative vision of reality in the greeting they shared with one another.

Christians greeted one another with these words...these words which are found at the beginning of many letters in the New Testament.

Christians greeted one another with these words: "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ."

Now those words might not mean much to us in our modern context. But these words would have spoken volumes to the Christians living in the Roman Empire.

"Grace" was the word used to describe the Roman emperor's benefaction.

"Grace" was the word used to describe the emperor's goodness, his goodwill, his ongoing blessing to the empire as a whole.

“Grace” entailed all that the emperor did for the well-being of the empire and its people, providing food security, providing order and government, so on and so forth.

Most especially, the emperor provided “grace” to the empire and its people in the form of the *pax romana*, the peace of Rome.

The peace of Rome was of paramount importance, because before the rise of the emperors, the Roman Republic had suffered 100 years of civil war.

100 years of unrest, of bloodshed, of ongoing turmoil.

In the news, we have been hearing about our country finally withdrawing from the War in Afghanistan, a war that has spanned 19 years and four presidential administrations.

So, we can only imagine 100 years of internal conflict.

And so peace was the greatest blessing the emperor bestowed on the people.

And so when we read that Christians greeted each other with the words, “Grace and peace FROM God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...”

“Grace and peace” to you, NOT from the emperor, but from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ—these words of early Christians were really saying something.

The early Church was creating a new worldview. The early Church was creating an alternative vision of reality, distinct from that of the Roman Empire.

This Christian greeting is all the more profound when we realize that among the titles of the Roman Emperor were “Father of the Fatherland,” and “Lord.”

The emperor was “father” and “lord” to the people of the empire.

But early Christians greeted one another with the words, “Grace and peace from God OUR Father and the LORD Jesus Christ.”

Early Christians, indeed the early Church, viewed reality differently than that of the pyramidal, hierarchical structure of Roman society, where the emperor was at the top and where everyone else was resigned layers of lesser importance.

Early Christians saw God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ at the pinnacle, and everyone else, emperor, citizen, non-citizen, slave, Gentile, Jew, woman, and man, everyone else as equal.

The pyramid of Roman society was upended.

The Christian vision was not just a reversal of fortune, where the Have's became the Have Not's, and the Have Not's became the Have's.

The Christian vision was not such where there was an exchange of positions, and that the pyramid was still in play.

No, Christianity destroyed the idea of the pyramidal structure, because the powerful were brought lower, and the lowly were elevated higher, so that everyone was equal.

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But what does all this have to say to our modern day society?
What bearing does this worldview of the early Church have on us?

Well, as it turns out, it is meant to have quite an impact. For the Christian message is still the same for us today.

The Christian message is that all people are of equal standing before God.

And so it is our mission as Christian people to call attention to and to work towards dismantling any and every hierarchical structure, where any individual is deemed of greater or lesser status than another.

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In a powerful book by Drew Hart, who is a professor at Messiah University, not far from here...

In Drew Hart's book entitled *Trouble I've Seen*, which I would commend to your reading leisure...

In Drew Hart's book, he calls attention to one such hierarchy in present day American culture, which has emerged around race.

It is the hierarchy that has emerged, he says, from the colonizing and conquest of the Americas.

It is the hierarchy that has emerged from the subjugation of the people of color.

It is the hierarchy that has emerged from Jim Crow laws, and the 3/5's evaluation of black people that is part of the history of the Constitution.

Drew Hart's book is a difficult read in terms of its challenge to the power structures in our society that had emerged from white Europeans.

And although I don't agree with everything he says, Hart makes a powerful case for the need to revisit and rework this particular hierarchy in our present day society.

This is just one hierarchy; and perhaps there are others we would name.

For again, sisters and brothers in Christ, the thematic anthem for God's work in the world is captured in the Magnificat.

God is bringing down the powerful from their thrones. And God is lifting up the lowly.

God is working to bring an equal playing field for all people.

And if we truly believe that God is our Father, and believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord, then our worldview can't help but be changed like how the early Church had their worldview changed, where there is no distinction between people.

In truth, we are all children of God. God has done great things for all of us, such that God in his Son Jesus Christ has brought about the redemption of all people through the power of the cross.

In this way, no person is greater or lower than any other, since all have received the grace and peace of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.