

INVESTING IN GRACE¹
Luke 1: 39-55
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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She is just a wisp of a girl, hardly into her teens. I think of her with long black hair tied up on top of her head with a handkerchief, and only a few strands are stuck to her brow by the sweat. She has been mopping and cleaning all day. Her mother passed on a few years back, and her father is...well, God only knows what her father is doing...says he's doing odd jobs. He isn't the most respectable person in Nazareth. But Mary is known as a good kid. She stays home, cooks for her father, and cleans the house.

I

The only real tension between Mary and her father comes when the local carpenter takes a liking to her and eventually proposes marriage. "I suppose Joseph is OK," says her father, "but he's a bit old, and he's not exactly the kind of guy I had in mind for you." What kind of guy he had in mind for her, he never really says. But she knows that her father would rather see her with Joseph than with one of those Roman soldiers living down the street.

I imagine her dusting furniture when she has the vision. She is rubbing grandma's old rocking chair—the one her father was rocked in and the one

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she was rocked in...rubbing it with olive oil the way Joseph showed her. The shine is incredible. While she is watching the funny play of sunlight and olive oil on the grain of the wood, she seems to see something that scares her out of her wits.

Even someone with as little education as Mary has heard of angels, but why would an angel come to her? “Hail, Mary, full of grace” is how the Catholic liturgy has preserved the words she hears. We have it in a modern translation: *Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you.*² God knows she needs that assurance because the news she is about to get from that angel was enough to panic anyone.

But could we pause in this familiar story long enough to say that this is also God’s word to us? *Greetings, favored one; the Lord is with you* is precisely what God says to every one of us, especially when we receive devastating news. Remember, we are reading this story in hindsight. For Mary, the news she receives is the same as a death sentence. *You will conceive...and bear a son*, says the angel, and he might as well have said, “Your days are numbered, for you know what the law says about pregnancy outside of marriage.”

One of the great understatements in the entire Bible is when the story says that Mary *was much perplexed by his words*, and later she says, *How can*

² Luke 1: 28.

*this be?*³ The Greek word we have translated as *perplexed* has the tone of being greatly troubled. So let me get right to the point: there are times when we receive news that greatly troubles us. We get the phone call that someone we love is in the ER; we sit down at the doctor's office to hear the results of a test; we find a pink slip in our mailbox; we receive an email that devastates us. It happens to everyone eventually, and the question on our hearts is always Mary's question: *How can this be? How can this possibly be? How could this happen to me?*

Could the Christmas message you long to hear be as simple and as profound as this:

Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you.

Greetings, most loved one; you are not alone in this crisis.

Greetings, my dear child; you are loved fiercely and tenderly by God, and no matter what happens in the ER...no matter what the results of the test...no matter what the company does about your job...no matter what the email says...you are loved infinitely, completely, immeasurably, and you are not alone.

³ Luke 1: 29, 34.

Mary did not ask for this dilemma. She did nothing to deserve it. She has no clout, no voice, no alternative really. What would she say to Joseph? What would she say to her father? To her friends? No wonder she took a quick trip up into the hill country to visit her cousin! But then comes the poem: Mary's song, we call it...the Magnificat.

II

The Magnificat is mostly sung in Latin. I think I know why. It turns our world upside down. If we were to find this poem disconnected from its context—say, on a telephone pole in Lincoln Square—we might assume that it came from some radical political party bent on overthrowing the powers-that-be. It uses all the popular titles for Caesar Augustus: Lord, Savior, Mighty One. Every generation has had those who love those titles. But her song turns all that upside down. It de-absolutizes the power politics of her day.

It reminds us of the “Confessing Church” in Germany in 1934 when Hitler was in power. In the town of Barmen they crafted what later came to be known as “the Barmen Declaration.” Leaders like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth declared that the church is solely Christ's property and that it is not the property of the Third Reich. They were boldly saying, “Jesus is our Fuehrer.” Bonhoeffer paid for it with his life.

There are still those who love to genuflect to power, but the fact is that we do not sing our carols to the Caesars of any age; we sing them before a manger. It is as if God is saying, "You want to see a Savior? I can lift up a Savior from the working class. Don't insist on finding a Savior in Jerusalem or Rome or Washington. Don't be surprised if I raise up a Savior from the boondocks like Nazareth or Peoria or Spencer or West Boylston or Rutland."

Christmas is about investing in grace. Not us...we are more likely to invest in a sure thing. It is God who invests in grace. Nothing but grace would choose a child like Mary. A sure thing would be to choose a mother from royalty, or at least from the ranks of the upper class. But not this God who invests in sheer grace! Trudging up the road to Elizabeth's house, we hear Mary singing of a God who has stooped to look with favor *on the lowliness of his servant*. She's a nobody! Only God would have the grace to do that.

Even Mary could hardly believe it! Mary What's-her-name from the wrong side of the tracks, the one with no diploma, no coming-out party, no executive position in the corporate structure, the one who is the butt of many a joke in Nazareth. If this is the way God operates, then all bets are off! This is a God with the grace to turn anything upside down.

III

We are so rational...so skeptical. We are used to reading the stories of scripture: "Once I was blind, but now I can see." "Once I was lame, but now I can walk." "Once I was dead, but now I'm alive!" But that's scripture...we expect that. It is part of the script of religion!

But then if we listen closely we hear others.

"Once I was confused, and now I have a sense of direction...of purpose."

"Once I was afraid, but now I have new courage."

"Once I was despaired, but now I have hope."

"Once I was angry at God, but God listened to my anger and gathered me in."

And we think, can it still happen? Can God turn me around? Can God still lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things? Can God make a difference in the world we live in? Can Mary's song, the Magnificat, express a reality for the likes of us?

IV

What if today, while the words of Mary's song drift through our minds, we were to drop all pretense built up from all our sophistication, our academic degrees, our station in life, our titles and honors, and admit that at

times we are as confused and even as helpless as that young woman named Mary who looked with terrifying wonder at the angel and said, "Me? How can this be?"

We are in the presence of a God whose grace is so unimaginable that it can take your upside-down life and place it right-side up. The same God who came to Mary What's-her-name, is here...now. It is your name that you hear, and the message begins the same: *Do not be afraid...for you have found favor with God.*