

God Rides the Lamé Horse—Fourth Sunday of Advent

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[Micah 5:2-5a](#)

[Luke 1:39-47](#)

This Sunday as well we used a different version of Mary's Song, or the Magnificat, from Luke 1:46-55 adapted in *A New Zealand Prayer Book*:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord:
my spirit rejoices in God my saviour,
for you Lord have looked with favour
on your lowly servant:
and from this day all generations will call me blessed.
You O Most Mighty have done great things for me:
and holy is your name.
You have mercy on those who fear you:
from generation to generation.
You have shown the strength of your arm:
you have scattered the proud in their conceit.
You have cast down the mighty from their thrones:
and have lifted up the lowly.
You have filled the hungry with good things:
and the rich you have sent away empty.
You have come to the help of your people:
for you have remembered your promise of mercy,
the promise you made to our forebears:
to Abraham and his children forever.

Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT

We've been bouncing all over the place in Luke's Gospel these past Sundays of Advent. Last week John the Baptist was preaching, now he's back in the womb! As we join the story here a messenger of God has just told young Mary that she is to conceive in her belly a son.

This baby will be great, the messenger says, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. Wow. Ok. Mary says, "How can this be?" The messenger says, "Nothing is impossible with God. In fact, look at Elizabeth, your old relative

whom everyone thought was barren." The angel says, "Did you know that she will have a baby too?"

Convinced, Mary says, "Ok. Let it be with me according to your word." And now hearing about her relative Elizabeth's pregnancy, Mary up and leaves! How does she get permission to go, I don't know. Does she run away? Luke's Gospel just says she went with "haste" to see Elizabeth.

And the moment she enters the house, John (the Baptist) kicks in Elizabeth's belly. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry,
You're so blessed among women,
and the babe in your womb, also blessed!
Blessed woman, who believed what God said,
believed every word would come true!

And then Mary responds... She responds with perhaps one of the most beautiful parts of the Bible: Mary's song of all that is *impossible*, that we read as our canticle this morning. Mary's song of *unbelievable dreams*.

She sings that God has done great things for her and made her blessed! But the years to come, mothering Jesus till the end, will be tough... She sings that God has scattered the proud in their conceit! But the last time I checked our politics, our culture, and all the talking heads on cable TV the proud are as proud as ever, and not scattered one bit... Mary says that God has cast the mighty from their thrones, and that the rich are sent away empty! But if you look into who owns how much of our world's wealth, it is but a tiny fraction of white men who control the destiny of our feverish globe.

You have to ask yourself: What is this beautiful, wonderful nonsense that Mary is spouting? What is this joyful message, that she sings, saying: "God, you have come to the help of your people: for you have remembered your promise of mercy..."

These silly hopes, this song of Mary, is the heart of the story of God. To our hardened and rational understanding, it is meaningless. But, to our small, still hearts of faith, we might begin to understand.

God, Scripture tells us, all the way through, always chooses the little ones, the unlikely ones. God whom we call Almighty, is a God always of outcasts. Abraham and Sarah were much too old to conceive, Moses was slow of tongue and speech, King David was the runt of the litter, the littlest brother, meant for nothing but watching the sheep, and yet, like the others, was a bearer of God's promise and became the greatest of Israel's kings the shepherd of God's very own people. It is only the lowly who know how to be lifted up by God.

And so, giving new life to the image of a little, humble, shepherd king Micah the prophet and poet tells us today that God's ultimate ruler, the Messiah, will be from a little clan. The Christ, the awaited one... is humble, Micah sings. Not a vicious warrior or avenger soaked in the blood of his adversaries, but Micah says: he shall be the one of peace.

So, today, the Holy Spirit in Scripture tells us to enter into the experience of two terrified and joyful pregnant women. There is Elizabeth, advanced in age, from a high and good priestly family—but stricken with shame because she is called barren and without child. And there is Mary, her cousin, a nobody, in a nowhere town, in a region occupied by the cruel Romans, a womb-slave handed from father to husband. Together these two ladies boast, they extol, they magnify, in a way that might seem impossible to us: Elizabeth extols and sings of Mary, celebrating her. And Mary's spirit, in turn, boasts of and extols God's power.

These two know something, understand something, that we often miss. And they know and understand something that, as a church, we have gotten very timid about expressing. Elizabeth and Mary have just learned in their very bodies that God is powerful beyond measure, but they also now know, that God only works with the small, the broken, and the plain.

To start with, you have to remember that overall, the story of Jesus is very pathetic. Jesus, this savior of which the angel spoke to Mary, is born homeless. Not only is he not welcomed by his people, But, in fact, the puppet king of Judea appointed by Rome, named Herod, because of the rumor that Jesus was the true king, killed thousands of babies in an attempt to get to him.

And so, adult Jesus goes about for a few years healing and curing disease, but finds no real reception, not even in his home town do they care. The authorities of his own people conspire against him. He's quickly rushed through a sham-trial and handed over to the occupying governor. His followers all promptly abandon him, and Jesus is killed by the governor's troops in the most humiliating manner imaginable, by crucifixion. All while his mother watches on.

Again, there is nothing about this that is worthy of boasting, it would seem. And yet Elizabeth says to Mary: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." This is not Elizabeth's ignorance. But this is how God works, we believe. How does God lift up the lowly? How are the mighty cast from their thrones? How are the proud scattered? Because God is not interested in power. God's very self, God's essence, God's life *is* mercy. And this mercy, God expresses, with young women, with old couples, with slow of tongue prophets, and with crucified saviors.

Martin Luther is said to have put it this way: "God rides the lame horse, and carves with the rotten wood."

We are very blessed to have two very real examples of this extravagant mercy within ordinary things, here, today. Adam is here this morning, and we will witness his baptism! With a very regular basin of ordinary water God declares for Adam unending belonging and eternal love in the body of Christ.

And shortly after we will celebrate again our Lord's Supper. With a sliver of stale bread and a sip of wine from a plastic cup—but there God pours out Christ's precious body and blood again and again to declare we are all worthy, all forgiven.

It all comes down to a paradox: the mercy of God is so big, it is so vast and inexpressibly precious, that it can only be expressed with very ordinary people and very common things. And for a rag-tag and merged-together people like us, here, this is very good news.

Amen.