

Subversive Joy (Luke 1:39-56)

A Sermon preached by Stuart Taylor

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Where are you going? The wandering shepherd sternly asks the young woman traveling alone. Where is your husband? I have no husband she replies. Then where is your father? It is neither safe nor proper that you should be traveling alone. Imagine this exchange between a rough shepherd leading his goats down from the mountains and a very young woman passing him by on the trail that leads up into the hill country of Judah. Imagine how she might have looked to you, this odd sight of a young woman, traveling alone. With a veil wrapped around her head and face all you can see is a quick and fleeting glance of her oh so determined eyes. Mary responds I am going to my kin in the hill country. And with a quick bow she continues on her way before more questions can be asked. We join Mary stride for stride on this lonely pilgrimage as she continues her journey higher and higher into the hills, towards the home of her kinswoman Elizabeth. Can you imagine this Mary an unmarried young woman who has brought scandal upon her family by becoming pregnant? And if this was not enough she has been hearing voices (of angels, she says). Now if you were the parents of a teenage girl that in the eyes of society was both disgraced and deranged what would you do? Our text doesn't spell this out but one could guess that maybe Mary's family decided this might be a good time for her to get out of town and visit kinfolk in the hill country. Or perhaps they simply acquiesced in an even more audacious explanation. Maybe this journey was Mary's idea. Maybe Mary's was no longer accepting the strict parameters that defined a young woman's life in the ancient middle- eastern world. Maybe it was Mary's own resolve, her claiming a special role given to her in her mysterious encounter with the Angel Gabriel that we have already considered. Whatever her motivation, Mary goes off without a chaperone on a long 70 mile journey to visit her elderly cousin Elizabeth who is herself unexpectedly six months pregnant with a child who was destined to become John the Baptist. A dear friend of mine, the Rev. Rachel Srubas wrote an advent poem based on this story. I quote: "Don't just watch her go. Follow her. Emulate her urgency, her clear sense of direction. You have your own heaven-given secrets and capacities; your own map of the territory that will lead you to the magnificent life you could live." Shall we follow her, this Mary as she climbs into the hill country of Judah?

Let us go more deeply into this scene of two pregnant women offering one another love, welcome and mutual support as they bring new life into the world. Henry Nouwen one of the great theologians of this past century wrote a moving Advent meditation on this moment when Mary and Elizabeth came together. "I find the meeting of these two women very moving because Elizabeth and Mary came together and enabled each other to wait. Mary's visit made Elizabeth aware of what she was waiting for. The child leapt for joy in her. Mary affirmed Elizabeth's waiting. And then Elizabeth said to Mary, "blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled". And Mary responded, "My soul magnifies the greatness of the Lord". She burst into joy herself. These two women created space for each other to wait. They affirmed for each other that something was happening that was worth waiting for". Nouwen goes on to say that this is the model for a truly Christian community. Mary and Elizabeth model a community of support, celebration and affirmation in which we can lift up what has already begun in us but is not yet. I would wholeheartedly agree with Nouwen that the visit of Elizabeth and Mary is one of the Bible's

most beautiful expressions of what it means to be in community. Every Christian community is like unto Mary and Elizabeth, gathered together around a promise, affirming something new that is coming into our world.

And it is this little community of two pregnant women that enables Mary's song to be sung. When Mary finally reaches her kinswoman Elizabeth, when the two are joyfully reunited Mary will sing her song that has become known to us down through the centuries as the Magnificat. Meditating on this song from beginning to end, I am struck by the sheer joy of it. Everything about the song conveys the absolute delight, the rapture of this young woman that is offered up in a song to God. My soul magnifies the Lord and rejoices in God my savior. What is the real source of Mary's happiness? Perhaps every mother here would testify to having experienced moments of indescribable joy in response to having life within you. Male preachers would do well to not speculate too broadly about what women experience in pregnancy and childbirth. But I would think that in spite of the nausea, in spite of the physical and emotional strain, in spite of the worries and concerns about bringing a child into the world, there are moments of joy for the new mother that I suspect transcend every other happiness known to humankind. There is a part of me that is curious and indeed envious of the joyous bond that exists between a mother and her unborn child. Of course as fathers we can share in the anticipation of childbirth. Whether we are mothers or fathers we know that the approaching birth of a new child is always the beginning of a new possibility in human history, a new future is in the making. And for that we feel hope and joy.

But Mary's song goes beyond what any parent might naturally feel in expectation of the birth of a baby. Mary's song exults in the coming of a new creation, in the birth of a new heaven and a new earth. Let's look at the song more closely: "My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my savior!" What was Mary experiencing when she sang these words "my soul magnifies the Lord"? What first came to mind as I pondered this line was the word "magnify". My immediate association with the word magnify was a microscope or lens which when focused on a small bit of something magnifies it to wondrous proportions so that we can see what really is. Could it be that in this moment Mary's soul became a kind of lens through which she could look upon the tiny something of her life and see the luminous greatness of God? Mary's Magnificat, like the lens in a microscope brings into sharp focus a given point of everyday life in order to see God's saving action. Mary's magnifying not only brings into focus the saving presence of God but also opens that up and out expanding that awareness. It is really Mary's soul; the soul of the one who rejoices in God that is magnified. The presence of joy makes the human soul as large and spacious and open as God's own being. It's peculiar that we still think of the human soul as contained within the body. Because in moments of rejoicing and praise we know it is our body which is contained in our soul that has become as open and expansive as the universe itself.

"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for God has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden". Why does Mary rejoice? Because in her God has turned things upside down. Another kind of god, if about to send a Child into the world would surely have chosen a royal mother but not this God to whom Mary is singing. This God has stooped to regard the low estate of God's handmaiden. In the eyes of the world, Mary is a non-person. A woman, a poor woman, an unmarried poor woman who is pregnant. Mary is one of the "anawim" the word the Hebrew scripture uses to describe the lowly ones, the ones who live on the margins, the poor, the widow, the orphan the refugee. Mary is celebrating a God who sees her when to the entire world she is invisible

or less than human. Mary is celebrating a God who regards her as a "Thou", a person God wishes to be in covenant relationship. But here is the astounding leap of faith that occurs in the Magnificat. It is here in Vs 51 that the Magnificat shifts. Mary's soul as a lens for God's light casts light not just on her life context but on the world. It is not just the handmaiden of the Lord who is raised up but whole groups of the lowly that though cast down are to be lifted up. Mary has become the spokeswoman for all those of low degree. Mary's Magnificat is like an introduction to the overarching theme of Luke's Gospel that is played out in every chapter and verse to follow. And this theme is what I call the Great Reversal or as Luke puts it over and over and over again, the first shall be last and the last shall be first. The song continues, "God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, God has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty handed". Mary's song moves from the reversal that God has brought about in her life to a celebration of the reversal that God is bringing about in the larger world around her. God has taken an up-side down world and turned it right-side up. The messianic hope of the Magnificat heralds a spiritual realignment of eternal values that brings about a political and economic reversal in this world. Mary's song speaks of a restructuring of the social order. Mary's song is a call to revolutionary hope and action. Mary's song is a psalm of subversive joy. Is it any wonder that in many of the most famous Christmas masses that celebrate Mary's Magnificat in the history of classical music, these words about the rich and the poor, the mighty and the lowly are excluded, written out of the text. But Mary's Magnificat on its own terms has nothing to do with the sentimentality that we find so prevalent in our culture around Christmas time. If we take these words seriously, we simply cannot avoid the political and economic real world implications of Mary's song. Her praise is not only audacious; it has a polemical, subversive edge to it that overturns the established order. "God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, God has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty handed"

The thing that is so remarkable about the Magnificat is that Mary's joy is born of a gift that is already received and yet is still awaited. Mary's joy is like the joy of every Christian who rejoices in spite of something that for all practical purposes would make it impossible to be joyous. Mary's joy, Christian joy is expressed in spite of evil's grasp upon the world, in spite of the discouraging evidence that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Mary's joy, Christian joy is experienced in the present in spite of the enormous obstacles, the tensions, the conflicts the setbacks experienced by God's people in everyday life and in the struggle for the beloved community - a society of peace and justice. In the Magnificat, Mary's soul is magnified because she can see and taste that moment when all the bowed down, the widow the orphan, the poor the refugee, all the "anawim", the "lowly" ones of this world will be lifted up. Mary's soul is magnified because she can envision the advent of that day when all creation will sing together the song of god's justice and peace and love. And isn't that what the season of Advent is about? Advent is not a countdown of how many shopping days are left until Christmas. Advent is the invitation to wait and watch and with Mary to experience the joy of the age to come. Mary's song is ultimately an act of radical trust as she joyfully abandons herself to the purposes of God. Her song names God as absolutely reliable, available and intimate as she entrusts her life to that God. This joy is available to each and every one of us and can fill our entire existence, making us attentive to God's liberating action not only in our lives, but also in the larger world. This joy must not lessen our commitment to struggle with and for

our fellow human beings still ensnared in the world as it is. Mary's Magnificat has touched the heart of Christian joy.

Listen, can you hear it? The only way to train our ears to hear this melody of the universe is to join in ourselves. The question before us is this. Will we make Mary's song of joy our song? Will we join Mary in singing into birth a new world, a new humanity? This morning we have heard the song of joy sung by a peasant girl 20 centuries ago who is in a very real sense the first Christian. Maybe if Mary sang this song as a lullaby to the baby Jesus that would explain why he grew up to be such a radical. May we reclaim Mary as the spiritual mother of a new humanity waiting to be born. Mary is the spokeswoman, the audacious voice for all of God's "anawim", the lowly ones. And because she sings joyfully of God's future she invites us this advent season to envision with her the Coming reign of God. And the Coming Reign of God for which we wait will bring about the reconciliation of women and men, of rich and poor, of nature and humanity in God's new creation. In this season of Advent, may our souls be magnified. And may our spirits rejoice in God our Savior. Let us not only hear Mary's hopeful joyous song but take up the chorus with our voices and our lives.