

“A Love Song at the Birth of Jesus”
Luke 1:39-56

Fourth Sunday of Advent - Love

Dr. Greg Anderson
December 24, 2017

Riverdale Baptist Church
Whitehorse, Yukon

Introduction

Lest we are tempted to think what we have just heard is basically a beautiful story,

which along with the rest of the beautiful stories: a bright star in the sky, a virgin with child, a baby in a manger; . . . are simply that, stories; constructed narratives conveying ideas and values held to be important by Christians (Lest we are tempted . . . O what a fine story)

allow me to remind you of our author's opening claim to the Gospel:

Luke 1:1-4 Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, . . . so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

Not simple story, constructed narrative, but truth, eyewitness report, facts.

And at center stage in all of it is Mary.

Imagine Luke possibly interviewing her some 60 years later. Mary would have been elderly by then, but it is possible the two met.

Let's assume Mary had a good memory, or given the stupendous nature of what happened that Mary wrote down and preserved an account. After all Luke tells us Mary, in response to the birth of her child: . . . **treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.**

So, Luke asks her about the birth of Jesus and from the storehouse of her memories she begins to sing.

It is the most fitting thing she can do in the face of the glory of it all.

Now, in the midst of the activity heralding the arrival of Christ: angelic announcements, shepherds in the fields, wise men from the East and their shorthand messages – Emmanuel, a Saviour, Messiah, King of the Jews;

We have relatively little Gospel commentary on the deeper meanings, the theology, how to respond to the 'why' of the birth of Mary's child.

Of course, the opening chapter of the Gospel of John supplies this: **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us . . .**

And we have commentary in Paul's letters concerning the incarnation.

But in the Synoptic Gospels, there is not so much.

In fact, Mary's song is the fullest account we have as to what was happening and how to respond during that Christmas time 2,000 thousand years ago.

Text

In thinking about her song, first give some thought to the singer.

A young Jewish girl and against the backdrop of the people of Israel, a girl characterized by holiness of life and passion for the living God.

When the Angel, Aunt Elizabeth, and Mary herself say she has found favor with God I believe we can think of Mary in terms of what a true saint of God would be – beneath whatever else characterizes her as a person – a true lover of God.

Our singer is also first time pregnant.

I asked Carol about this. Carol has been pregnant and has been working with pregnant women – hands on - for forty years.

I expected Carol was going to tell me that young Mary was filled with wonder and awe, in being with child.

You know what Carol said: Mary was afraid! (Tells you how much I know!)

Well I get that. However, it is also my limited experience in meeting with countless couples that in the healthy marriage, the discovery of first pregnancy is infused with an overflow of tender hearted love between wife and husband.

Upon receiving the joyful greeting of Elizabeth in response to Mary's pregnancy, I can only imagine Mary's heart burst with love toward God who had caused her condition.

Finally, young Mary, in a way difficult for us to fathom, is a part of the tribe of God's people.

I say it is difficult to imagine because in our secular age we experience what the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, calls 'expressive individualism'. Wherein I realize my humanity by "expressing" who I believe I am rather than conform to models imposed by others and especially institutions.

But for Mary, she could not think of herself without also thinking of who she was as included in and defined by the tribe of God's people, the people of Israel.

Mary's thinking and acting are profoundly conditioned by her social identity.

This is something of who Mary the singer is. So, what about her song? - just two details.

First, if you happen to have a cross-reference Bible at home (a Bible where there is a listing for each verse of comparable verses) check out Mary's song, the Magnificat, and you know what you will find? Everything Mary sings about comes from the Psalms, sometimes the thought, sometimes the exact same words are used.

The Psalms have always been, among the tribe of God's people; God's gift to express back to God our most passionate thoughts and feelings. The Psalms are the language of God's people.

For Mary to compose her song with phrases from the Psalms, this could only have happened if her memory was infused with the Psalms.

She must have embraced the Psalms, day by day, as her way to talk to God.

This would have been typical of all God-fearing people in her tribe. She would have learned the Psalms upon her Mother's knee; from her Father's teaching; and in her weekly Synagogue worship. Psalm singing identified a person as belonging to God's tribe.

Second, Mary's song is comprised of three sections held together by a central theology

Her personal experience – **My soul magnifies the Lord . . . Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed . . .**

General social experience – **His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation . . . he has filled the hungry with good things**

God's tribe's experience - . . . **in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever.**

And in these three sections God's goodness toward all is characterized by one theological word: **mercy. His mercy is for those who fear him . . . He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy.**

Mercy sums up Mary's song. What is in her mind when she uses this word 'mercy'?

The Greek word Luke uses at this point is the same word used in the Greek Old Testament – the Septuagint – which translates the Hebrew word – **hesed**. *Hesed* was in Mary's mind. (1:72)

Now, in the Old Testament, which, of course, is Mary's Bible, **hesed** is a special word used to describe the nature of God's covenantal relationship with his people.

For example, in the Ten Commandments:

. . . but showing steadfast love (hesed) to the thousandth generation, of those who love me and keep my commandments.

'**Steadfast love**', *hesed* love is not just any kind of love, it is the love that initiates, sustains and glorifies a covenantal relationship – a relationship like a marriage.

So, when Mary, in the heart of her song, sings about the essence of what God is doing in the bringing forth of the Messiah, the Christ child, the baby Jesus born of Mary

When she sings: **His mercy is for those who fear him . . . He has remembered his mercy . . .**

Mary is responding to the steadfast love, the *hesed*, of God toward his people and most particular toward her personally.

When Luke asks the aged Mary, what happened so many years ago, she opens her heart with a love song to God.

Application

What does this mean to us on Christmas Eve in the year of our Lord, 2017?

We celebrate more than a story.

In fact, as a continuing part of God's tribe, the people of God, we participate in that which Mary so intimately participated in.

The steadfast love of God.

The importance of this, in 2017, has to do with the tsunami from our secular culture that would have us simply celebrate a long-ago story.

For example, the Harvard humanities professor, Stephan Greenblatt has just written a book on Adam and Eve. Professor Greenblatt's prior book on the effects of ancient Greek philosophy in today's secular culture won a Pulitzer prize.

His book on Adam and Eve is engaging, thought-provoking, and an attractive read. Fundamentally it is a book about the story, the myth of Adam and Eve that served as a defining paradigm in the development of Western Culture, but one that has been decisively discredited and put on the shelf for us moderns. We have come of age and no longer need the ancient fairy tales. We no longer need Adam and Eve.

I wouldn't be surprised if his next book is about Jesus.

Deeply problematic to Professor Greenblatt's hypothesis, from my perspective, is his inability to offer any satisfactory replacement, particularly anything as profound as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. If it is a lie, what is the truth? An entire civilization rose up with Adam and Eve as a founding truth. What is offered instead?

I am afraid, all too often what is on offer is what was expressed by the Canadian billionaire Barry Sherman who with his wife tragically died this last week

There is no God, no free will (we are only chemistry), no altruism and no morality, Mr. Sherman wrote in what he titled *A Legacy of Thoughts*.

"I cannot see that human behaviour differs in any fundamental way from that of numerous species on the savannahs of Serengeti. We are all driven by our instincts to eat, drink, procreate, protect ourselves and our young, and co-operate with others, particularly those most closely related to us, if and when it is to our mutual advantage," he wrote.

I, for one, will stay with Adam and Eve; the babe born of a virgin in Bethlehem; and the steadfast love of God toward all who fear him.

How do we appropriate this?

Mary shows us the way. Elizabeth said to Mary: **And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.**

Mary's choice to believe arose from her reaction to the *hesed*, the steadfast love of God.

And in her reaction to believe was an intertwining of love in response to the love of God.

Mary's love was formed and expressed and sustained and blossomed through God's gift to her and his people: words found in the Psalms, that fitted to music became her perfect vehicle to express love.

A concern with some of Evangelical praise music is the questionable theological veracity of its lyrics and with its utilization of musical forms not conducive to the expression of the majesty of God, the complex sinful condition of people and the sheer glory of Christ's redemption.

I think we can learn from the ancient church. Hans Boersma from Regent College writes concerning the expansive usage of the Psalms among the first Christians (we have more ancient commentary on the Psalms than any other Biblical book) :

When early Christians sang their psalms, they enjoyed the beauty of Christ. When early Christians read their psalms, they learned the truth of Christ. And when early Christians lived their psalms, they participated in the virtue of Christ. In each of these ways, they joined the perfect harmony of a new song.

At Christmas, this is Mary's gift to us. To respond to the great love of God in the birth of Christ with a heart of love expressed in God's gift of the Psalms, God's perfect Words to express everything in the midst of our covenantal relationship with him and as we sing to him in love.

Amen.