

A New Model of Manhood
A Sermon on Luke 1:39-56
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 23, 2018

Introduction

Today's story is about two women from different generations who meet and connect with each other. That is something we are trying to encourage in our transformation process. Both women would have been scorned in their day. Elizabeth was barren into old age. Mary, an unmarried peasant girl, was pregnant. It is a beautiful text about two strong women. That is rare in the New Testament.

So of course I want to talk about manhood. Mary asked, "Does your sermon have anything to do with your text?"

I believe that Mary's song, The Magnificat, has a lot to say about manhood.

First Move: Models of Womanhood

Today's text begins with the Visitation, Mary's visit of Elizabeth. The text describes two women of exemplary character. They are models of womanhood and humanity.

Mary is faithful. She has just been told by the angel Gabriel that she will conceive a child by the Holy Spirit and that she should call him Jesus. Gabriel also tells Mary that God will give her child the throne of David, that he will rule over the house of Jacob into the ages, that there will be no end of his rule, and that he will be called the Son of God. Gabriel also tells Mary that her relative Elizabeth has conceived a child in her old age and that she is now in her sixth month.

Mary believes everything that Gabriel tells her. She says, "Behold, the servant of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."

This is in contrast to Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah. Gabriel also had visited Zechariah, who was a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem. Gabriel told Zechariah that Elizabeth, who was an old woman and had barren for many years, would conceive a son who would be a prophet and bring people to the Lord. Zechariah questioned this, and Gabriel struck him mute until the birth of his son. Mary shows more faith than a priest in the Temple.

Mary is bold and courageous. When Mary receives the news from Gabriel, she travels by herself, pregnant, from Nazareth to Judea. This is a walk of many days. It was dangerous for a young woman to travel alone

Mary is compassionate. The apparent motivation for her journey is to congratulate her relative Elizabeth and to care for her. Mary stays with Elizabeth during the last three months of her pregnancy.

Raymond Brown, one of the leading New Testament scholars of the last half of the 20th century, calls Mary the first disciple in the Gospel of Luke. She acts in loving submission to God's will.

Elizabeth also displays exemplary character. Earlier in Luke she and Zechariah are described as righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments. When Mary greets her, Elizabeth doesn't condemn Mary for getting pregnant before she is married. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, not self-righteousness. She displays supernatural knowledge of the contents of Mary's womb. She recognizes that the child in Mary's belly will be her lord. Gabriel said nothing about Mary and Jesus to Zechariah.

Elizabeth's unborn child also has supernatural knowledge. He leaps in Elizabeth's womb when he hears Mary greet Elizabeth. Luke the author is reminding us of Jacob and Esau, the twins who were wrestling with each other in Rebekah's womb. This also fulfilled a prophecy that the two boys represented two nations who would be divided.

Elizabeth recognizes that Mary has been blessed because of the child she is carrying. This is characteristic of patriarchy, to value a woman because of her ability to carry a child. Elizabeth also recognizes Mary in a way that transcends patriarchy. She pronounces a Beatitude on Mary: she is blessed because she believes that the words spoken to her from the angel of the Lord will take place.

Second Move: Mary's Song of Praise

Mary responds with a song. It is called the Magnificat because that is the first word of the song in Latin: *magnificat*, which means magnify or make large by words. The Magnificat is the longest speech by anyone in the Gospel of Luke.

Mary sounds like a mystic. "My soul heaps praise on the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." Mary has annihilated her false self, the self that society forces on her, telling her that she is a 12-year-old peasant girl who could never draw the attention of God. Mary's soul is filled with God. She has found the union with God that is the goal of all mystics and she is experiencing joy.

Mary is humble and poor—she has no possessions. She says that God looked upon the lowliness of his slave. God took the initiative. Almighty God has looked with favor upon a peasant girl. Everything else in the New Testament flows from that.

Mary’s song is essentially a hymn of praise to God for loving her and for loving Israel. She recognizes God as her savior. This is the first time that the word *savior* is used in the Gospel of Luke. It is applied to God here and will later be used for Jesus.

Mary thanks God for lifting her up—all future generations will consider her favored by God.

She praises God for three attributes that God has shown to her: power, holiness and mercy. She believes that God has shown her mercy because she fears God. The Greek and Hebrew words for fear also mean reverence. Righteous Jews feared the power of God and revered God because of God’s holiness.

God’s mercy or love transforms Mary, just as it transforms us. The love spills out of Mary. She sees that she is not alone. God loves other people, too. The second half of Mary’s song is praise of God for what God has done for Israel throughout history.

God is bringing about a reversal of values. God is turning the world upside down.

“God did a mighty deed with his arm, he scattered the arrogant in the understanding of their hearts.” Mary could be referring to the Exodus story, when God’s arm parted the waters of the Red Sea and swallowed up Pharaoh and the Egyptian army. The heart was considered to be the seat of the will. The arrogant are people who look down on others. They are looking down when they should be looking up at God. The arrogant are prideful. They are more concerned about their own honor than God’s honor.

“God brought down the powerful from thrones and lifted up the lowly.” Throughout its history Israel was a small country surrounded by powerful empires. Whenever Israel prevailed in battle, it gave the credit to God. An example is David, a shepherd boy, who brought the tribes of Israel together to turn back the mighty Philistines.

“He filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” This reversal is portrayed later in the Gospel of Luke with the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Mary could also be looking forward to what God will do for Israel through her son. Jesus will rule in a new order, where the roles are reversed. Luke was writing this hymn at least 50 years, perhaps as much as 90 years after the crucifixion. Luke’s audience would know that Jesus had been executed as a rebel and that God has exalted

him through the crucifixion. The first followers of Christ were poor Galileans, many of whom had lost their lands to powerful landowners. Now they are the leaders of the church. They have hope in the promise of the kingdom.

Mary stands in solidarity with the poor. She compares her own lowliness to the lowly in society. She sees Israel as the personification of the poor. God will take the initiative to overturn a corrupt society in favor of the oppressed. God's choice of Mary as the Mother of the Christ is a sign that the reversal has already begun.

Third Move: A Reversal of Values

The Visitation is a story about two strong women, but the Magnificat is a hymn of praise to God. Mary celebrates three attributes of God: power, holiness and mercy. If we are to be perfect as God is perfect, then we should aspire to reflect God's power, holiness and mercy.

Men are infatuated with power. Power and judging are the attributes of God that men seem to care about most. Holiness and mercy? Not so much.

Part of that is the culture that men are raised in. What is the worst thing that a man can be in Oklahoma? Soft. Weak. What is the best thing a man can be? A warrior, especially for an athlete or a soldier.

The reversal of values cannot take place if all that happens is that the powerful are brought down from their thrones. There is always someone else to assume the reins of power. Another warrior will take his place. The problem is us, that we glorify power. We conceive of God as all powerful and we believe that power is divine.

Jesus embodies God's power and holiness and mercy. Jesus' power is a different kind of power. It is persuasive not coercive. Jesus has no power to work miracles where there is no faith.

God's mercy in Mary's song is a synonym for love. God's mercy is to those who revere him into generations and generations. God shows mercy to the lowly and the hungry. God comes to the aid of Israel, who remembers his mercies throughout history.

Mary is transformed by love. Love and mercy are more difficult for men. They do not want to appear soft.

Holiness is also difficult for men. Holiness is about being set apart from the profane. It is about truthfulness and honesty. It is about knowing the difference between right and wrong and always doing what is right. We sanctify ourselves and our actions, make ourselves and our actions holy, by doing God's will instead of by submitting to our own desires.

The women in the church have always done a better job of imitating Jesus. Women embody hope, peace, joy and love. Which of those are masculine traits? Men are joyful after a victory in a ball game or in an election. Hope, peace and love? Not so much.

Mary became venerated, especially in the Roman Catholic Church, because Christ and God were so distant. Mary displays the nearness and love of a divine parent.

We no longer wait for God to intervene to bring about the dramatic reversal of values that Mary sings about. The reversal of values begins with a reversal of our understanding of manhood. It will make us a kinder, gentler people.

I often ask myself, Why is Oklahoma so dead-set on the death penalty? Not just the death penalty. Why does Oklahoma lead the nation in mass incarceration per capita? Why does Oklahoma have criminal statues that mandate mandatory minimum prison sentences and no possibility for parole or parole as a possibility only after 85% of the sentence is served? Are Oklahomans meaner and crueler than other people?

I believe it is because we have an outdated definition of manhood. Oklahomans believe in *lex talonis*; retribution is the basis of our criminal justice system. If someone attacks us, we hit back ten times harder. That is how we understand manhood. Men are taught that they must be proud and respond to any insults or challenges to their honor.

Jesus is not our model for manhood. Jesus said, No more an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. We scoff at that. That is weak. Real men don't turn the other cheek. They don't love their enemies. They conquer their enemies. Our political system is all about raw political power. It has nothing to do with mercy or holiness.

Conclusion

What would a reversal of values look like today?

Donald Trump would be cleaning toilets in one of his hotels. The profits from his hotels would be shared with all the Mexican immigrants who work there.

Immigrants would be welcome. Preference would be given to the poor who come to America to seek economic opportunity.

Schools would teach humility, mercy and non violence and give them equal weight as reading, writing and arithmetic.

People would fear and revere God. We would practice silence and meditation instead of seeking constant stimulation from entertainment and technology.

Great wealth would be a disqualification for running for political office. All political decisions would be by consensus and unity instead of by a majority imposing its will on a minority.

The military would preserve, protect and defend the environment.

All athletes in professional sports would be amateurs. They would play for the love of the game instead of for money.

Criminal justice would be based on restorative justice instead of retributive justice. The death penalty, life without parole and the 85% rule would be abolished. The maximum prison sentence would be 25 years, and that would be reserved for offenders who pose a genuine threat to public safety.

Men would respect the wisdom of women, who are several centuries ahead of them in following Jesus.

The Nuns on the Bus would be the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church.

Hope, peace, joy and love would be the defining values of women *and* men.

Then all people would be transformed by God's love, just as Mary was. We all would join Mary in her hymn of praise to God.

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