

“What God Has Done”

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Readings: Luke 1:47-55

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Most years, around mid-December, I have undertaken the task of writing a family Christmas letter to send to relatives and friends around the country. They usually make me groan to write them and, I expect the reaction of my readers is similar. You know the formula well for you have found your mailbox filled with these records of trips taken, victories won, books published, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren excelling at this and that.

I can remember as a child of eight or nine my family receiving one of these letters from folks we had known in another town in Missouri. They had three boys a little younger and older than I was and they were all Boy Scouts or Cubs in that little town of my birth, Poplar Bluff. The father had been the scoutmaster there forever and his boys were the stars of the troop. I could hardly stand to read about them: “Ernie, already an Eagle Scout, went to Philmont, New Mexico this summer and was the youngest scout in his group there. You will recall he got his Eagle shortly after kindergarten (or so it seemed to me) and has earned every Merit Badge possible.” The mother would also go on about the other boys, older than Ernie, who had made great strides discovering causes of cancer, a project for the school science fair; or climbed the Matterhorn and returned to base in one day while in Europe to receive the Nobel Prize for bragging or discovering chocolate or something similar. I used to wonder if these kids ever had any of the same defeats and doubts that I had. Probably not; they had no time for that kind of reflection. Their mission was upward and onward so that their mother would have more stuff to tell in next year’s holiday letter.

To save my family and friends far away yet another version of a similar letter I decided several weeks ago to spare them that treatment. I decided that I would, instead, take a radical step: I would send a greeting declaring our gratitude for God's goodness to us all in the gift of the Christ child. "Peace on earth; good will to all..." That sort of thing. (What a novel idea, don't you think? Not that it was easy to exercise the discipline it took to refrain from shooting off a few flares in celebration of all that our grandchildren have achieved in soccer, gymnastics, third grade composition and the San Anselmo Pre-School art show. (It is pretty impressive stuff, if I do say so myself). But, I decided to save it for another letter at another time. (One of the grand advantages of e-mail is that we can tell news of the family from month to month, as it is happening, leaving room for the Christmas greeting to be just that: a greeting). This year, it will be enough to join St. Luke's Mary in her song of gratitude for all that the Lord has done for her.

Do you remember those verbs she emphasized?

"...the mighty one *has done great things* for me,

and holy is his name

...He has *shown strength* with his arm;

He has *scattered* the proud...

He has *brought down* the powerful...

and *lifted up* the lowly...

He has *filled the hungry* with good things and

sent the rich away empty." Lk. 1:51-53

I wonder what the mother and father of the world's most accomplished Boy Scouts would have thought of that declaration from Mary? I don't know but I expect any irony would have gone unnoticed. I do know afresh what this review has meant for me and, thus, lift it up for consideration among us all. This is grand poetry and good cause for rejoicing. No wonder Mary's song is reflected in our favorite Christmas carols. We'll even sing one of those, today, at the close of worship, so joyously thankful are we. (Joy to the World, the Lord has come).

We have so much to be grateful for in this and every year, beginning with our own litany similar to Mary's, in which we lift up the blessings God has poured out for us and our families. We Christians have a particular script we follow for our recitation of joy in this season, a script first outlined in Mary's Song, this acknowledgement that *with all her being* her soul "Magnifies the Lord."

It is a song of thanksgiving for the lives we have and share, however long or short our days. It is a song of joy for recovery from illness and gratitude for all those who advance the healing that we know to be a gift from God. It is a time in which we pause to reflect on the Mighty Acts of God as told by the prophets and witnessed by all who have experienced freedom from bondage. This is a time of thanksgiving after forgiveness from others toward whom we have acted out of fear and self-centeredness. It is a time to consider how grateful we are for friends, and so take the moment to tell them so, no longer assuming that "they know all of that." Life is short. God is good. Let us give thanks for all that has come to us from the Lord's hand. It is a time to be humble...and grateful...a little less full of self and a lot more full of God. It is a time to share that joy with others.

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I'll write a note to our nearest and dearest, far and near, perhaps sometime in the spring. That will be time enough to tell them how I'm planning to dive in a submarine for a quick look at the Titanic in April; and how exhilarating it was to free fall from twenty thousand feet on my 70th birthday (not really); and how much it meant for three generations of our family to walk the Silk Road of Marco Polo in fewer days than anyone else before, even Marco Polo. I'll tell all that another time. For now, in this season of Advent celebration, it is enough to mirror Mary's song: "(The Lord) *has helped his servant Israel*, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." Lk. 54-55.

Speaking of songs we have heard before but often forget, do you remember that song we used to sing around the campfires at church camp and on youth

retreats called Kum-Bah-Yah? It is a simple lyric that is a petition to God--perhaps originated by tribal people in Africa, no one knows for sure-- asking God to "Come by here." The verses sing out that "Someone's singing, Lord, come by here" and, later, that "someone's praying," or "crying" or "waking" or "dying." It can go on indefinitely, this simple declaration of a situation and a petition for the Lord to bless the people. As a leader at church camps I was often touched by the conditions children suggested be included as we added verses to the song: Someone's "hurting" Lord, or "lonely" Lord, or "fearful" Lord, or "doubting" and, always, "thankful." They all seemed to comprehend the solace the words gave as though they were a gift that kept on giving.

That little song, like most lyrics we would write, is not as eloquent as Mary's wonderful poetry of Luke's gospel, but it does manage to capture, in its several petitions and affirmations the unquestioned belief that God's *presence here*, where we live and move and have our being, *has made all the difference*.

In her song of this season, Mary puts the emphasis where it belongs: on the Lord who, above all, her soul magnifies as she lives out her young life filled with hope, expectancy and rejoicing. She sings to the God who has so tenderly looked upon the likes of her: humble, undeserving, common creature that she is.

Thanks be to God.