

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent: The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55)

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It's dawned on me that I've been here for 7 years, but more than half that time has been under the shadow of the pandemic. We know it's not really gone but we sure do like to pretend. As a society, we've kinda jumped ahead to where we want the world to be, going right past where it actually is. It's a lot more fun this way, but it's not exactly prudent. That said, I'm not sure how my soul would take another period of significant Covid restrictions. I know it'd be tough. I know y'all would inspire me yet again. I know I'd probably sulk anyway. And I know St. Thomas' would survive.

I hadn't stopped to think about this before, but it occurs to me that celebrating Advent IV comes with a similar temptation to jump ahead. We know it's the 24th. We know what's coming tonight, and a lot of us have crammed this day about as full as a day can get. I'd love to jump straight to the arrival of Jesus and go on and do presents and fly to see Becca and then pause time and savor things a bit. But much to my dismay, I don't control time. Really, if I had my druthers, I wouldn't be all that interested in jumping ahead / back to the birth of that baby. It's sweet and everything, don't get me wrong. But it's the beginning of the same story we tell every year. If I could control time, you better believe I'd jump past the pandemic. But I'd go further, still. If I could, I'd love to jump straight to the Kingdom of God. Yeah, I'd jump straight to that Kingdom 'cause that's when all the things that're wrong with this world get set right. The poor won't be with us 'cause money won't mean a thing. The injustices'll be settled. Peace will reign, fears will calm, love will heal. And all the hierarchical rankings of humanity will get leveled. Yeah, that sounds pretty darn good to me. But the problem with getting there through time travel is that it lets me off the hook. If I just jump straight there, I don't have to do any of the work. I won't have to worry about the poor, injustices, war, terror, or hatred. And I won't have to worry about where my movements make things worse for other people. I mean, that does appeal to my laziness, but it's not exactly doing things gallantly.

Of course, I don't control time, and I'm not a time traveler yet, so in some ways this is all just a fun exercise. But writing that desire off isn't quite so simple. There's a lot of folks out there who imagine the role of Christians to be just that. Wait for the Kingdom and then enjoy the fruits. Problem is, if all we do is wait, then all that suffering and all that inequality keeps going, and some benefit while others get ground down. The idea of not being able to earn God's grace is a big part of our theology. We don't earn it, we can't lose it. But that doesn't mean that we stop there. We can't earn God's grace by doing good things. But we do respond to God's grace. And our responses come from places of gratitude, love, and the same grace we've been given. This world needs us to respond to its needs right now. We can't just jump ahead to utopia, we've got to make it.

In Mary's Song, the "Magnificat" if you're fancy, we get a highly personal glimpse of what we need to do. "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord," she says. "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior;" Mary starts her song with a clear recognition that God is incredible. The work of the Kingdom, the arrival of Jesus, the choice to serve, it all comes from the same font of God.

"For he has looked with favor on his lowly servant. From this day all generations will call me blessed: the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name. He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation." Mary knows where she sits in the social hierarchy, and it's not at the top. Yet God chose her. Out of all the women in history, God chose her. It's bigger than that. Out of all the people in history, God chose her. The old wording says God "magnified" Mary, made her greater. God took a seemingly random kid and elevated her to one of the most important people the world has ever seen.

"He has shown the strength of his arm, he has scattered the proud in their conceit." I actually like the old wording of this line better. "He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts." In the

promise of her son, Mary sees what is to come. Sources of pride get leveled, and those who put their trust in those sources of pride lose their way.

“He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.” The Kingdom in its fullness turns the values of this world upside down. Kings like Herod share the same station as unwed mothers, the hungry are fed, the rich face the reality the rest of us live.

“He has come to the help of his servant Israel, for he has remembered his promise of mercy, The promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children for ever.” The people of God continue to be blessed and highly favored, and through God’s many covenants, the meaning of “the People of God” expands. All this to the Glory of God; all this through the Glory of God. Thy Kingdom will come, that’s the promise of the Messiah. And we can help it get here, that’s the promise of Mary.

Part of me wishes we didn’t need to do any of that hard work. It sure would be easier. But this kind of work is deeply gratifying, and while that’s great, it’s not the reason we do it. We do it because it connects us to each other. Our work to bring about the Kingdom draws us into deep relationship with the kinds of people we’d otherwise overlook. Our work reminds us that our world is not as it should be, and it desperately needs us. Our work here and now reminds us that, if we ignore the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, we ignore Christ himself, and we’re just as likely to overlook Christ on the cross as the homeless woman on a snowy night. The promise of this final service of Advent, just hours before Jesus’ arrival, the promise of this morning is that our work is not in vain, that Christ will come, God’s Kingdom will come, and it will come in the most inappropriate place our world has to offer. Which is, of course, exactly where the Kingdom *should* begin.