

“God Gives Us the Strength to Be Weak”

Luke 1:39-56

Mary’s Song has been given what is for us a strange name -- the Magnificat.

The name Magnificat comes from the Latin translation of the first line of Mary’s Song: “Magnificat anima mea Dominum,” “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

Luther says that these words express the exuberant joy with which all her mind and life are inwardly exalted in the Spirit. Therefore she does not say, “I exalt the Lord,” but, “My soul exalts Him.” It is as if she cannot find the words to express the joy she feels having been so blessed by the Lord.

She knows that God cannot be magnified through her simple voice or mouth, through the work of her hands, the thoughts of her mind, or the strength of her will. God is unchangeable. There is nothing that even the mother of our Lord could do to magnify and expand God’s glory and honor [LW 21:307]. That was Luther’s take on her situation.

Mary’s words, like our feeble words of praise and glory, are but a humble response to the gift of salvation we have received from God.

It is as King David sang in Psalm 34: “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him” [Ps. 34:8]. Tasting is put before seeing, because this sweetness of the Gospel, this sweetness of the Good

News of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation through Jesus Christ, cannot be known unless the person has experienced and felt it for himself. Trust is felt inside. Trust is not in seeing. Our Lord said, “Blessed is he who has not seen and yet believes.”

In singing the Magnificat, this song of praise to the Lord, inspired by the Holy Spirit Himself, we see this young Hebrew girl (probably not more than 14 years old.) And she has experienced the sweetness of the Gospel – that she will forever be called blessed, not because of what she has done, but because of what God has done through her.

She admits that she is of a humble, lowly estate. She is nothing in this world. She has no claim on any honor or exalted high place. She is the Lord’s servant. She is also the Lord’s child.

We too are called to humble service for the Lord, and we too are more than servants – He has adopted us as true children. Therefore, when we sing the Magnificat – the Song of Mary – we do so not just as a remembrance of her being chosen to bear the Christ child, but we sing these words with ourselves in mind: “My soul magnifies the Lord...For He who is mighty has done great things **for me.**”

Mary also links together two words that we normally would assume are mutually exclusive: mercy and fear. God is indeed merciful, kind, generous, and forgiving. But He has high expectations, or rather (depending on your perspective) I should say He has low expectations, of those He loves.

Just as He is merciful, kind, generous, and forgiving; He expects the objects of His mercy and forgiveness to be humble, submissive, devoid of personal pride, and full of fear toward Him. Those are attributes of greatness in the Kingdom of God.

As sinful human beings, it is not in our nature to be humble, to place the needs of others before our own, to willfully submit out of love and give up our individuality, to relinquish our prideful inmost thoughts. But God sends us His Holy Spirit, cleanses us of our original sin in Baptism, feeds us and strengthens us through Word and Sacrament so that we have the strength to be weak in the eyes of the world.

The proud will be scattered; the rulers will be brought down; those who claim to have no fear will bend on trembling knee. St. Paul tells us, “Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

At some point, everyone will bow their knee to the Lord and publicly state their understanding of the One, True God. The only question is, will that profession be done in faithful love and devotion to the Lord while on earth, or will it be through fear and trembling on Judgment Day when it is too late?

But even though we are God’s faithful people, called to be His servants, adopted as His true children; even though we have been shown unspeakable mercy and kindness, our Father in heaven is to be feared.

We had this conversation in Confirmation class a couple weeks ago. Now fearing the Lord is not always the trembling in your boots kind of fear that we experience when confronted with God’s justifiable anger with our sin. Fear of God, as the church has always understood it, also involves a reverent awe of the majesty and power of God.

Unfortunately, most people have lost that. In the days of Mary and Joseph, there was such a reverent awe concerning God that no one dared even to speak His name – Yahweh. Even at the temple and in the

synagogues, when reading Holy Scripture, when the name Yahweh appeared, they would insert the word Adonai, which means Lord.

They did not want to risk misusing His name or have happen what we now experience in our culture, that God's name has become such a common word that some people cannot seem to speak two sentences without using it in some frivolous, meaningless manner.

Among so many, God is no longer feared; our Father in heaven is no longer revered and treated with majesty. I grow rather tired of the Almighty God being referred to as the "Man upstairs." For so many, that is all God is – a generic power in the universe. He's "the Big Guy in the sky."

The saying holds true that familiarity breeds contempt. There is great danger in assuming a familiarity with God that in any way reduces His majesty and importance in our minds.

If you read the words of the hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" you see that the message is much more than "God is our pal."

Fear and mercy – Mary understood their connection. She feared God. And when the angel Gabriel came and said, "Fear not," Mary submitted herself to the Lord's will, listened to His Word, and in faith accepted the hard road that the Lord put before her.

He gives us the strength to be weak.

Fear the Lord; may your soul magnify the Lord; and trust in His mercy.
Amen.