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Sermon: November 27, 2011
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“HOPE FOR THE HUMBLE”
Luke 1:46-55

♪ Luke chapters one and two record four hymns (actually poems) around the birth of Jesus: ① Mary’s Magnificat {1:46-55}; ② Zechariah’s Benedictus {1:68-79}; ③ the Gloria {2:14} proclaimed by angels; and ④ Simeon’s Nunc Dimittis {2:29-32}.

These passages don’t get much attention in our circles, do they? We tend to zero in on the action of Christmas and skip over the spoken words, other than those of the angels. (And the innkeeper: everyone knows that he said, “There is no room in the inn,” right? – which is interesting, since Scripture does not even mention an innkeeper, much less record his words.)

But these hymns are not filler, not fluff, not color commentary, and they are not they primarily testimonials of private experience. Rather, they are profound theological statements inspired by the Holy Spirit. They are God’s voice speaking through his chosen vessels so that humankind might know the purpose and power of the Messiah’s life and ministry.

All four hymns are strikingly robust, visionary, and provocative. There is nothing corny or cutesy or sappy about them. They depict the incarnation as a decisive turning point, a crisis event that will ultimately {Lk 2:34} **“cause the falling and rising of many.”**

Do you remember how Herod greeted the Good News of the Lord’s birth? He commanded the slaughter of {Mt 2:16} **“all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under.”** Of course, the scribes and Pharisees were unaware of the trouble Jesus would cause one day; if they had been they might have strangled him in his cradle.

Their hostility is pointless if Christ is just an adorable symbol of giving. It is equally nonsensical if he came merely to forgive our personal sins so we can go to heaven when we die. But study these hymns and it begins to make sense.

✎ Their rejection of Jesus was damnable. Yet to their credit they perceived that Christ’s advent has world-shattering social, political and economic implications. At least they took him seriously.

□ Please turn to Luke 1. In verses 26-38 Gabriel appears to the Virgin Mary, who is betrothed to Joseph. The angel announces that the Holy Spirit will cause her to conceive a child, who **“will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his [ancestor] David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”**

□ In verses 39-45 Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant despite her old age and life-long barrenness. **“Filled with the Holy Spirit,”** Elizabeth says: **“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your**

greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said... will be accomplished!"

☑ That brings us to Mary's Song.

■ Verses 46-47: **"My soul glorifies" (or "magnifies") "the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."**

○ It sounds like the opening line of Hannah's Song in First Samuel 2:1: **"My heart rejoices in the LORD; in the LORD my horn is lifted high."** (I.e., God has {NIV Study Note} **"delivered [me] from disgrace to a position of honor and strength".**)

The resemblance is not coincidental. The Almighty has caused each woman to miraculously conceive a child. Each will bear a son who is going to change the world in God's service (Samuel will be a prophet and spiritual leader, and Jesus is Messiah). Samuel's greatest work will be to establish David as king. Jesus will inherit David's throne and establish the Kingdom of God.

☞ The hymns share several theological themes: the LORD God's power, holiness and mercy; God's faithfulness to his covenant with Israel; his care for the poor and the oppressed; and the complete reversal of worldly values within God's realm.

■ **"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,"** verse 48a: **"for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant."**

📖 {McKnight, "Mary's Magnificat"} **"These words are less connected to personal humility with God than they are to the condition of being a poor woman."** Mary is one

of the *Anawim*, the suffering poor who trust God to deliver them from affliction.

○ The same Hebrew word appears in Psalm 37:11, where the NIV translates it as **"the meek."** I am starting with verse 10: **"A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found. But the meek" (the *Anawim*) "will inherit the land and enjoy good peace."**

The *Anawim* are {McKnight} **"known... for their intense messianic hope."** At the dawn of the first century they are *still* seeking God's justice, *still* longing **"for the Messiah to come to relieve them of their condition,"** *still* yearning for a once-and-for-all end to **"the injustices, the brutality, and the utter impiety of King Herod"** and the tyrants who preceded him.

The *Anawim* have clung tenaciously to hope through long centuries of captivity, exile, foreign oppression and homegrown corruption. Finally, he is beginning to vindicate them, and Mary **"rejoices in God [her] Savior."**

⌚ She speaks in what we might call the "prophetic perfect" tense. It sounds like the past tense, yet it is used in the Bible to describe events that have not yet occurred but undoubtedly will.

■ Verses 51-53 reveal the content of Mary's hope, presented as the **"mighty deeds"** of God.

⚡ Hope # 1: **"He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts."** Based on the promises of God in Scripture, Mary anticipates that the Messiah will accomplish a moral or spiritual revolution.

→ Pride is endemic to the kingdom of this world. But though he is {Php 2:2-7} **“in very nature God”** Christ does **“not consider equality with God something to be”** exploited. He is **“[making] himself nothing, taking the very nature of a [slave].”** He will call all who would follow him to {Lk 9:23, NLT} **“put aside ... selfish ambition”** saying, {Mt 6:1-2, 5, 16, NLT}

“Don’t do your good deeds publicly, to be admired ... When you give to someone in need, don’t shout about it as the hypocrites do... to call attention to their acts of charity!... When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray... where everyone can see them... And when you fast, don’t make it obvious, as the hypocrites do so people will admire them for their fasting.” And so forth.

That is hope for the humble.

✎ Hope # 2: **“He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.”** Based on the promises of God in Scripture, Mary anticipates that the Messiah will accomplish a social revolution.

This is not merely a regime change. Throwing out the bums and replacing them with better bums is not good enough! It is the institution of a whole new kind of social and political order, in which coercive power is repudiated and replaced by the transforming power of self-giving *αγαπε* (agape) love.

→ For though he commands {1 Co 15:24} **“all dominion, authority and power”** Christ is entering into a state of

powerlessness. He will refuse to command the {Mt 26:53} **“legions of angels”** for rescue and {Php 2:8} submit **“to death on a cross!”** Not only so, he will demand that all who want to be his disciples {Lk 9:23-24, NRSV} **“deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow [him]. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for [his] sake will save it.”**

That is hope for the humble.

✎ Hope # 3: **“He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.”**

Based on the promises of God in Scripture, Mary anticipates that the Messiah will accomplish an economic revolution.

The hopes and fears, loves and hatreds of the kingdom of this world are all wrapped up in money and possessions. Having more is nearly always seen as a blessing, having less is nearly always exclusively as a curse. Money is a god and making money a religion.

→ But while he owns {Jn 1:3} **“all things”** (for **“through him all things were made”**) Christ is becoming poor. He will live his whole life at or just above the subsistence level, and in time he will become homeless. He will require all his followers {Mt 6:19-21} **“to store up... treasures in heaven”** rather than **“on earth,”** and he will call a surprising number to {Lk 18:22} **“sell everything... and give to the poor.”** When one man refuses {Lk 18:24} **“because he [has] great wealth”** Jesus will exclaim: **“How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”**

That is hope for the humble.

The Magnificat is not at all corny, cutesy or sappy. It is robust, visionary, and provocative. It depicts the incarnation as a crisis event that will {Lk 2:34} “**cause the falling and rising of many.**” Is it any wonder Herod tried to murder the Messiah? Is it any wonder the scribes and Pharisees hated Jesus?

Mary is completely right in everything she says, but there are two great mysteries she does not yet realize.

✝ 1st, the Messiah she bears will initiate his revolution, not by seizing Herod’s throne or his armies, but by bearing a cross, then rising again. He will direct his followers to live and operate by the same tactics.

✝ 2nd, the Messiah will not immediately usher in his kingdom in its fullness. He will allow it to grow gradually, almost invisibly – like a seed germinating and sprouting, like yeast spreading through dough, or like a baby developing in its mother’s womb.

☆ We are still waiting. But when the time is right Christ will return as {Rev 19:16} “**King of kings and Lord of lords**” and he will fully accomplish the promises of the Magnificat. Until then, we have the privilege of living out the words of the Magnificat.

That is hope for the humble!