



LESSONS

MICAH 5:2-5A

LUKE 1:46B-55 (52) OR

PSALM 80:1-7 (7)

HEBREWS 10:5-10

LUKE 1:39-45 [46-55]

PRAYER OF THE DAY

STIR UP YOUR POWER,
LORD CHRIST, AND
COME. WITH YOUR
ABUNDANT GRACE AND
MIGHT, FREE US FROM THE
SIN THAT BINDS US, THAT
WE MAY RECEIVE YOU IN
JOY AND SERVE YOU
ALWAYS, FOR YOU LIVE
AND REIGN WITH THE
FATHER AND THE HOLY
SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW
AND FOREVER. AMEN.

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Liturgical Day: The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Date: December 20, 2009

Sermon Title: I Am the Servant of the Lord; I Live to do Your Will

*And Mary said, "I am the servant of the Lord.
I live to do your will."*

Marty Haugen: "Holden Evening Prayer"
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Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This weekend's Gospel lesson includes one of the more familiar passages in our Bible: *The Magnificat*. It is a song of hope and joy. It is a song that was shared between two women who played prominent roles in the Christmas story: Mary, the mother of our Lord, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptizer. This song, *The Magnificat*, was their witness to the incredible wonders that God was working in their lives; their testimony to the power of God that had touched them, and had moved them to faithfulness.

It's at this time each year, the Sunday before the celebration of Christ's birth, that we turn our attention to Mary, the mother of our Lord. There is a mystery around this woman — this one who gave birth to Jesus of Nazareth. In the Roman Catholic Church, much emphasis has been given to this mystery. In their tradition, Mary has come to hold a place second only to Christ himself. She is revered as the greatest of all Saints. Much emphasis is placed on her holiness, her purity, and her faith.

In the Lutheran tradition, Mary has been given a somewhat less prominent place. She is remembered as the mother of our Lord, and when we take time to think of her, we are thankful for her part in the salvation story. But for the most part, Mary has become little more than one of the non-speaking parts in the annual Christmas program; a bit player in the grand production of God's story.

It is from the Biblical perspective, however, that we see Mary in the clearest light. The writer of St. Luke's Gospel viewed her as neither an untouchable Saint, nor an insignificant bit player. Instead, the evangelist saw in Mary a moving example of humble service.

Luke was right: humble service is what Mary's story is all about. We see that from the very start, in her conversation with the angel Gabriel. Her first reaction was fear and doubt, as she reacted to the angel's strange and troubling words. Soon she moved beyond that to a willingness to participate in God's plan for her. This is apparent in today's passage. In the words of the Magnificat, Mary says:

God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

If Mary sensed that to be a part of God's plan in this way would not be easy, she was right. There would be scorn from townsfolk who didn't understand the nature of her pregnancy. There would be times when she wanted to sit and talk with her son, but the crowds that followed him everywhere, and seemed to need so much from him, would prevent that from happening. And most clearly, there would be the day when she stood at the foot of the cross, in absolute anguish, as he painfully died.

It wouldn't be easy to be the mother of our Lord, and a cautious, cost-counting person probably would have passed on the opportunity. But Mary was willing — and more than that, she humbly considered it an honor to be



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

invited to serve in that way. Not because she had low self esteem, and couldn't stand on her own two feet. Not because she feared the wrath of God, and what would happen to her if she chose to ignore God's call. But instead, her willingness came from the fact that she knew that the world would be touched by God through her service. She knew that the One who had acted powerfully in history was now acting powerfully through her — and the result would be salvation for all who would believe.

In Mary, we begin to catch a glimpse of what it means to live one's life as a servant. To live as a servant doesn't mean to be a doormat. Servanthood does not mean acting as a submissive slave who has no choice. Mary shows us that to live as a servant is a deep and powerful act of hope. It is to believe that God visits this world in concrete ways through our acts of service. It is to stand with Mary, in the hopeful belief that through our service, God's gracious intentions are acted out — in a way that touches people, and moves them to faith.

That concept runs counter to the thinking of our society. Today, servanthood is equated with weak people. Servants are those who are unable to achieve enough success to become masters. Servants are those who don't know the language well enough, or aren't educated well enough, or don't come from families who can give them enough of a head start. Servants don't serve because it is their first choice — servants serve because they aren't powerful enough to do anything else.

Servants are not the ones who receive our admiration these days. The high achievers of the world are the ones who impress us. They can buy anything they want — go anywhere they want — do anything they want. Because of their drive, their perseverance, their self-interested dedication, they have achieved many successes. And even though it has cost some of them their families, their health, their emotional well being, or their morals, we continue to be impressed with them.

The insightful person wonders if these are truly powerful people, or is there something else going on here? Do they compensate for their sense of powerlessness by amassing fortunes? Do they make up for their inability to enjoy intimacy for the competitiveness of the corporate world? Do they push their loneliness away with frantic activity, fifteen or twenty hours a day?

Today's Gospel lesson teaches us that the most powerful people are those who have the strength to become servants. One has to be powerful indeed, to have no regard for the things that our world cherishes. Mother Theresa could have been a successful nurse in the suburbs of some fine city. Nelson Mandella could have become a corporate lawyer and made a comfortable living for himself. Martin Luther King Jr. could have stayed in the academic world and become a well known professor and lecturer. And Mary, the mother of our Lord: who knows what opportunities might have been available to her had she not listened to the words of that angel, Gabriel?

Each of these individuals saw something greater. They were able to see lives of service as acts of hope. They trusted in God's transforming power to work through their service and change the world. They didn't become caught up in the chase after wealth, or prestige, or fame, or extravagance (even though they obviously had the ability to achieve it if they had wanted to). Instead, they were faithful enough to believe that God would work through them, if they gave themselves in humble service.

The good news is that the same can happen in your life and in mine. We don't have to have the depth of commitment of a Mother Theresa. We don't have to have the political courage of a Nelson Mandella, or a Martin King Jr. We don't have to play as central a role in the story of salvation as Mary. But in our own way, and in our own place, we too can live as servants of our God. Maybe it means reaching out to one who is lonely, and secluded in a care facility. Maybe it means providing food for a family on the edge of homelessness. Maybe it means working with disadvantaged children, or people suffering from abuse, or those who are imprisoned. In these simple, humble ways the words of the Magnificat become a reality — even in our own day and time.

The lowly are lifted up. The hungry are filled with good things. And the promise made to Abraham so many years ago lives on in believing hearts today. Not because you or I are so terribly powerful, but because through our simple, humble acts of service, God's power touches the world.

That's the legacy that Mary's story leaves for us today. Perhaps Mary can encourage us to see servanthood in a different light. Perhaps Mary can help us to understand that servanthood is not the condition that is left to those who can manage nothing else. But instead, servanthood is the only way the truly independent person of faith is able to follow faithfully along the path that God has called us to travel. This morning, after being strengthened by the Word and the Meal, as we say those final words, *Let us go in peace and serve the Lord*, may God grant us the strength to go out those doors and do exactly that. Then perhaps the result will cause us to respond with hope and joy: *Thanks be to God*.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor

Gospel Lesson; English Text: ⁱ

^{1:39} In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶ And Mary said,
 "My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever." ⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

^{1:39} Αναστᾶσα δὲ Μαριὰμ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ταύταις ἐπορεύθη εἰς τὴν ὄρεινὴν μετὰ σπουδῆς εἰς πόλιν Ἰούδα, ⁴⁰ καὶ εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν οἶκον Ζαχαρίου καὶ ἡσπάσατο τὴν Ἐλισάβετ. ⁴¹ καὶ ἐγένετο ὡς κούσεν τὸν ἀσπασμὸν τῆς Μαρίας ἢ Ἐλισάβετ, ἐσκίρτησεν τὸ βρέφος ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ αὐτῆς, καὶ ἐπλήσθη πνεύματος ἁγίου ἢ Ἐλισάβετ, ⁴² καὶ ἀνεφώνησεν κραυγῇ μεγάλη καὶ εἶπεν· εὐλογημένη σὺ ἐν γυναιξίν καὶ εὐλογημένος ὁ καρπὸς τῆς κοιλίας σου. ⁴³ καὶ πόθεν μοι τοῦτο να λθη ἢ μήτηρ τοῦ κυρίου μου πρὸς ἐμέ; ⁴⁴ ἰδοὺ γὰρ

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Worship/Lectionary.aspx>

ⁱⁱ St. Luke 1:39-55, *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ὡς ἐγένετο ἡ φωνὴ τοῦ ἀσπασμοῦ σου εἰς τὰ ὠτα μου, ἐσκίρτησεν ἐν ἀγαλλιάσει τὸ βρέφος ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ μου. ⁴⁵ καὶ μακαρία ἡ πιστεύσασα τι σται τελείωσις τοῖς λελαλημένοις αὐτῇ παρὰ κυρίου. ⁴⁶ Καὶ εἶπεν Μαριάμ· Μεγαλύνει ἡ ψυχὴ μου τὸν κύριον, ⁴⁷ καὶ ἠγαλλίασεν τὸ πνεῦμα μου ἐπὶ τῷ θεῷ τῷ σωτῆρι μου, ⁴⁸ ὅτι ἐπέβλεψεν ἐπὶ τὴν ταπείνωσιν τῆς δούλης αὐτοῦ. Ἴδου γὰρ ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν μακαριοῦσιν με πάσαι αἰ γενεαί, ⁴⁹ ὅτι ἐποίησεν μοι μεγάλα ὁ δυνατός. καὶ γιον τὸ νομα αὐτοῦ, ⁵⁰ καὶ τὸ λεος αὐτοῦ εἰς γενεὰς καὶ γενεὰς τοῖς φοβουμένοις αὐτόν. ⁵¹ Ἐποίησεν κράτος ἐν βραχίονι αὐτοῦ, διεσκόρπισεν ὑπερηφάνους διανοίᾳ καρδίας αὐτῶν· ⁵² καθείλεν δυνάστας ἀπὸ θρόνων καὶ ᾤψεν ταπεινοὺς, ⁵³ πεινῶντας ἐνέπλησεν ἀγαθῶν καὶ πλουτοῦντας ἐξαπέστειλεν κενούς. ⁵⁴ ἀντελάβετο Ἰσραὴλ παιδὸς αὐτοῦ, μνησθῆναι ἐλέους, ⁵⁵ καθὼς ἐλάλησεν πρὸς τοὺς πατέρας ἡμῶν, τῷ Ἀβραάμ καὶ τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Luke 1:39-55, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).