

Mary the Prophet

Luke 1:46b-55 (December 13, 2020)

Luke 1:46b-55

46And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, 47and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” 56And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Historical Context

During the Middle Ages, as the church's leadership became more and more distant from the people, Mary became important in the prayer lives of the common folk, as one who could empathize with their plight and mediate forgiveness. In the councils of the Church through the centuries, she gradually gained supernatural qualities. She was declared absolutely free from personal sin before her birth and to this day (the Immaculate Conception, a doctrine formally proclaimed in 1854). She remained perpetually a virgin (a doctrine affirmed by church councils by the 7th century), and she was taken directly from earth to heaven (the Assumption, 1950).

Theme: Mary the Prophet

While Protestants may accuse Roman Catholics of overemphasizing Mary's role to the point that she is venerated almost on par with her son, we may go too far the other direction. For many Protestants, Mary is just a peasant woman chosen to bring the Son of God into the world. Both worship of Mary and reducing Mary to her biological role miss out on something very important: Mary's example as a person of faith, called by God, struggling with the daily demands of her life. It is this Mary who can help us prepare spiritually for the coming of her son.

It is the gospel of Luke that best portrays the fullness of Mary's human life as an example of faith for us. Luke's portrait of Mary cracks open the snow dome and lets Mary out to stand flesh and blood, life-size, before us and invite us to participate with her in giving birth to, raising, mourning, and—eventually—following Jesus Christ. Luke portrays her in a startling role: one that shakes up the way we've been brought up to think of her and invites us to stop observing her and start imitating her.

For Luke, Mary is first a prophet. We think of Mary, not as outspoken and bold for justice, but as quiet and passive. Yet here in the Canticle of Mary in Luke 1:46-55, we get a different picture of Mary. Here Mary sings a song of praise to God who shakes up the status quo, who lifts up the humble like her, and chooses her, rather than a queen or princess, to be the bearer of God's Son. She foreshadows her son's prophetic ministry that will do the same thing.

This Christmas season, we have much to learn from Mary the prophet. While her specific task is unique to her, the prophetic call extends to us all.