

The paradox of the Magnificat

Luke 1:39-55 (December 19, 2021)

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

According to our best knowledge, Jesus Christ was born around 4 BCE. This year was a challenging year for the Jews. When Herod the Great died in 4 BCE, Jews rebelled all over the land. The Syrian legions under the direction of Rome crashed the Jewish rebellions and burned the city of Sepphoris in Galilee and reduced its inhabitants to slavery. Jesus grew up in Nazareth about 4 miles from Sepphoris. Those who could not hide from the Syrian legions were killed, raped, and enslaved. Mary and Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth must witness this horrific act.

Theme: The paradox of the Magnificat

Luke shapes the Magnificat by having Mary speak of God's actions in the past tense: God looked, did great things for me, showed strength, etc. Thus, we see that the Magnificat is a paradoxical prophecy. It speaks of a future God will bring in through the yet-to-be-born messiah using past tense verbs. There is a sense, then, in which Luke is proclaiming that already at the point of awaiting the coming of the messiah, salvation is a done deal.

The paradox of the Magnificat is the paradox of our faith. Already the reign of God has arrived, but when we look around at the world we plead that God's reign might yet come. Is not this the paradox of Advent itself: Christ already came (born, preached, healed, opposed the powers-that-be, died, resurrected, and ascended) and yet we begin the Christian year waiting, preparing, and hoping for him to come?

At the center of the paradox is the concern for **why** Jesus came/is coming. We often talk about salvation in terms of individual redemption. But Mary will not allow us to think of individual salvation apart from Jesus turning the power structures of the world on its head. As the beginning of the Magnificat that focused on the reversal of Mary's situation cannot be separated from the latter portion that focused on systems of power being reversed, our salvation is part and parcel of the saving of the world.