

## “GLORY IN LOWLINESS”

PSALM 126, ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11  
LUKE 1:46B-55

MARKET SQUARE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN  
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“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
And my spirit rejoices in God my savior,  
For God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed.”

This is the only line in Mary’s Magnificat that speaks directly to her personal situation. Notice that Mary identifies herself as lowly. Mary was a young unmarried peasant woman. That is four strikes against her. Oh, wait, she was also pregnant out of wedlock. That is at least two more. It was probably a fair assessment to label herself as lowly. She might have added insignificant, overlooked, unimportant, poor, weak, forgotten, an outcast. She was a nobody among nobodies. She had no status, no power, no standing. And yet, she does not name herself as lowly as if it were a thing to be despised. In Mary’s eyes, lowliness is not a curse or even something to be avoided. It is her reality and the place from which God can and will work. “For the mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is God’s name.”<sup>1</sup>

While lowliness is the place from which God can work, wealth and power seem to be a detriment. Mary sings,

“God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
And has brought down the powerful from their thrones...  
God has sent the rich away empty....”<sup>2</sup>

God’s economy turns our notions of power and influence on its head. We tend to believe it is those with power, prestige, and wealth that serve as the movers and shakers of the

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:49

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:51-53

world. They have the respect to command people's attention, the resources to make a difference, and enough notoriety to be leaders. But according to the Gospel, power, wealth, and prestige are of little to no concern to God. In fact, they may only serve to get in the way. If you want to serve God, you might need to get knocked down a peg or two or learn what it's like to be sent away with nothing to show for all your hard work.

We tend to believe, even in the church, that we need to have it all together in order to serve. When asking an individual to help teach Sunday school, I am often met with, "Well, I'd like to work with the youth, but I really don't know my Bible that well. I'm afraid I won't be able to answer their questions." Trust me, I understand that fear. And the short answer is this, "You are right, you won't be able to answer their questions." But ultimately, that is not the point. You are not invited to work with young people because we assume you are Biblical scholars or great theologians. We do not assume you have all the answers. We expect that the youth will stump you with their questions.

It is not your great knowledge that we seek but your willingness to try to remember what it was like to be a teenager and to walk alongside the young people as they explore their faith and ask their questions. You are perfect not because you are wise and grand but because you are who you are - just another human being seeking to live faithfully.

Your humility or lowliness, so to speak, is a gift for it is that which God can use. If you don't think you have all the answers, then you won't answer what is theirs to discover. You won't force your opinions but will explore the text together. You will be changed because you too will learn. Your lack of knowledge becomes a gift because it is used to help others learn and grow as you yourself learn and grow.

This is, of course, true not only when we consider working with young people. It is true for any group with which we work. It is not your great skill but your willingness, your "yes" that makes the difference. If you are willing, God can certainly work in and through you making you a vessel of grace.

As odd as it may be, it is often our weakness, our brokenness, our wounds, and our pain that God can most use. I am reminded of the hats Marla has made for members of this congregation. They are beautiful caps lovingly made for those who will eventually lose their hair due to chemotherapy in their battle against cancer. I have had many members tell me how much they love the caps but even more important has been Marla's understanding. Marla knows what it means to battle cancer. She has been a breast cancer survivor for 16 years. She knows the fear and the pain. She can understand in a way the healthy cannot. She can speak from her own experience, empathize, and finally offer hope as well as a cap to keep the head warm and well adorned.

It is often our places of wounding and pain that become places of giving and grace. Because we have known heartache, we can empathize when others are

suffering. When we have known the depths of grief, we can recognize it in others and walk alongside. When we have known fear or anxiety or loss, we more readily offer a listening ear as well as hope and comfort to those who are hurting.

I have often said that it wasn't until I struggled financially many years ago and had to rely on the assistance of my family, that I began to understand how close any of us are to losing it all. Financial instability can be one illness, one accident, one divorce, one poor decision, one lost job away from any of us. It is harder to judge others when we realize it can happen to us as well. It is easier to offer understanding and assistance when we too have known the fear of not having enough and needed to rely on the generosity of others.

It is these broken places, these low places, that God can and does use. It is our lowliness, not our power, that makes us good servants and instruments of peace. As Mary sings, "God's mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. God has shown strength with his arm..." It is God's mercy and God's strength, not our own, that is of benefit to the world.

I think we often forget this, which is why we become overwhelmed with the need in the world. We become paralyzed because we believe that it is ultimately up to us, up to frail, fragile, broken, human beings to address and cure the world's ills. Sure, we are agents **in** the world's redemption. God requires our participation to address inequality, to feed the hungry, to challenge the disproportionate incarceration of men of color, to clean up and protect our planet but we do not do it alone. We are not expected to be experts or to wield great power and influence. Instead, God can lift up what is lowly, what is seen as unworthy or broken, and use it for good. God can take our small offerings and multiply them. God can use us, if we, like Mary, respond with a faithful "yes."

Mary continues, "God has...lifted up the lowly; and has filled the hungry with good things..." Here, I believe, hunger refers to both a literal and figurative hunger. God hears the suffering of God's people and wants for them their daily bread. But God also hears the yearnings of our hearts, and wants for us union and relationship. God meets us in those places of hunger and yearning.

Magdalena Garcia the author of the 2017 Presbyterians Today Advent Devotional says, "Advent is the celebration par excellence of the incarnation, a time when Christians affirm "God so loved the world" that God could not remain distant and uninvolved in the face of human suffering and despair...."<sup>3</sup>

God has a heart for the lowly, the broken, the wounded, the outcast, the lost, the lonely, the hungry, and the weak. God has a heart for those places within us as well. God seeks us out and works with and through us.

We are reminded of this each Advent as we await God's incarnation, which itself was lowly. Jesus was an illegitimate child born to a young peasant woman in a barn. There

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<sup>3</sup> Wednesday, December 6th in Presbyterians Today Devotional 2017.

was no power or wealth or prestige or status. Just a baby entering the world as any other child enters the world - with all the fear, excitement, pain, and agony of childbirth.

But it was at this birth that the angels cried Glory, glory to God! It was not for the power displayed but for the glory and the grace displayed in the simple, the ordinary, and the humble. The incarnation is remarkable partly because God came in the most fragile of forms. God chose to enter our world in lowliness that we all might be lifted up and filled with good things.

As we continue this Advent journey, may you, like Mary, trust that you too can be an agent of God's grace and glory. And may we recognize that others, even in their imperfections and frailty can be instruments of God's grace. We are each able to serve God, not because we know it all, have all the answers, or wield great power, but because we have a God that offers mercy and strength and works in and through our fragile beautiful human forms.

So we believe, so let us live.