

“Mighty Works, II”
 Sermon for 20 August, 2017
 Text: Luke 1:45-56

Well, I have learned a whole lot about *crying ravens* in Scripture lately, and you, if you’ve been attending, are probably some better educated, too. But aviary lore was not my only deficiency. I also didn’t know as much about God’s “mighty works” as I learned by following the thread of the ravens feeding Elijah by the brook Cherith. 1 Kings 17 & 18 straight to Martin Luther’s exposition of the Magnificat! (1521). Frankly, I had relegated the Magnificat to the Christmas readings file—which means that I almost erred in treating Mary’s song as less than “the inspired word of God . . . written for our instruction.” Honestly, if you had asked me, I would have replied, “Well, of course, it’s inspired—it’s in there isn’t it.” *But that is a camp, diffident, even dismissive response.* We would not have engaged over the text! I would like to try and do that this morning.

There is something comfortable about my daily chores—while Lynne is away— I let the chicken out, I put the chicken in. And in-between I try to weed a little, water the plants, fix meals and attend to pastoral duties. The 1812 Overture doesn’t exactly play spontaneously as I go about my summer days! *But the same cannot be said of Mary’s life following the news of Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy and, to top it off, a visit from Gabriel announcing the advent of the Promised One through her!* We can imagine how unsettling such good news might be but Mary, when she sang this song to her elderly aunt, was beginning to feel the stirrings of life within her womb! *She was indeed pregnant.* The Magnificat is an inspired look **into the mind (and soul)** of a faithful, young Jewish woman—she let’s us see what she is “seeing.” That is priceless, rare, even magnificent declaration of faith, a credo. This is what we know about her thoughts, as shared, related to the conception of the Son of God—the Savior of Mankind, our Redeemer. Mary was enlivened, enlightened and exalted—all three—in the process. As Mary shared this poem with Elizabeth, she is sharing it through me with you!

So, we come to Martin Luther, whose works have been collecting dust on my bookshelf, schooled me in these eleven verses of Scripture.¹ Luther’s intent was to instruct Duke Frederick about God (“to know Him and His works”—see footnote.) It was not possible to read this document, written some 500 years ago, and conclude

¹ I am referring to The Magnificat, Translated and Explained found on page 117 of Volume III. It was written to the 17 year old Duke John Frederick and completed in the spring of 1521. “The heart of man, then, being by nature but flesh and blood, is of itself prone to presumption; and when, besides this, power, riches and honor fall to his lot, these form so strong an incentive to presumption and overconfident security (PRIDE) as to move him to forget God and despise his subjects. Being able to do wrong with impunity, he lets himself go and becomes a best, does whatever he pleases, and is ruler in name, but a monster in deed.” “...the office of the ruler reveals what **manner of man** the ruler is. . . .Therefore, all rulers, since they need not fear men, should fear God more than others do, should learn to know Him and His works, and walk diligently,” as St. Paul says in Romans 12:8.(p.124)

Diligently here means a wise, moral and humble walk—not living proudly and so holding God and others (those around, above and below us) in open contempt!

that Luther was as easily speaking to us as to the young Duke! Knowledge of God's "mighty works" is **a corrective for the sins of presumption** that plague us as human beings. With this as introduction, remembering that it was the allusion to 1 Kings 17: 6 and 15 that brought me to Luther's treatment of the Magnificat, here's the text:

45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be[a] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from 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 on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name. (He is worthy of respect, honor and awe!)
50 And 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 mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
54 He has helped² his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 as he *spoke* to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”
56 And Mary remained with her about three months
and returned to her home. (ESV)

This is Mary's song³, a sacred hymn preserved and rendered in many musical settings throughout the intervening centuries. It is her lyrical summation of her profound religious, personal experience and I shared v. 45 to anchor this song in its historical setting. Mary shared this song first with Elizabeth during a pre-natal visit to Elizabeth's home in Judea. Luther highlighted Elijah's feeding by the ravens (p. 187) as "a mighty act of God," Mary's conception of the Son of God is a "mighty act of God," too. "in order properly to understand this sacred hymn of praise, we need to bear in mind that the "most blessed Virgin Mary" is speaking out of her own experience, in which she was enlightened and instructed by the Holy Spirit. For no

² God's help came in the form of "mighty works," performed for Israel to further the kingdom goals of the Most High God. What is implied is the work of leading them out of bondage to paganism, and out of slavery centuries later; claiming you as My people; forming you to praise me and to bless all nations. In these and other ways, God's presence was realized in Israel and through Israel by covenant. *Revelation, in this vein, is making plain what God meant by what He spoke, ordained and accomplished: "My meaning is . . ."*

³ We sometimes sing that wonderful Christmas carol, "Mary, did you know?" That carol raises some questions about what Mary might have known. This passage tells us what she did know. Wonderful.

one can rightly understand God or His Word who has not received understanding directly from the Holy Spirit. But no one can receive it from the Holy Spirit without experiencing, proving and feeling it. In such experience, the Holy Spirit instructs us as in his own school, outside of which naught is taught save empty words and empty fables." (p. 127) Frankly, this is a Mary I can relate to—it pushes all the “most blessed Virgin” titular stuff to one side and leaves a blessed young woman who heard God speak to her—presently as well as in the written word. It is to our advantage that we meet Mary as introduced by her song.

Picture Julie Andrews starring as Maria “In the Sound of Music.” Maria, a fresh, young unpretentious novice to holy orders is presented as “too mischievous, troublesome and too alive” to be a nun which, upon reflection is a very troubling assessment. Too alive to be a nun?! What must one be dead to be holy? Not by any means! *That’s not the gospel!* Furthermore, those hills are alive with more than music, even divine music, for they were created, formed and shaped by the sound of God—His word brought them into being! The whole world is shot through with the grandeur and glory of God. If your music is full of that, then your music is a magnificent thing indeed. As it stands, the “sound of music” is the animating and captivating principle of Maria’s life—it, not God, determines her destiny, shapes her love life and plays into romance rather than the love, praise or worship of God. That is some declension.

Also from Luther’s introduction, we have this instruction: “For even God in the beginning made the world out of nothing, whence He is called Creator and Almighty, so Hi manner of working continues still the same. Even now and unto the end of the world, all His works are such that out of that which is nothing, worthless, despised, wretched and dead, He makes that which is something, precious, honorable, blessed and living.” And the reverse is also true. “After this manner no creature can work; none can produce anything out of nothing.” (also p. 127) Ravens do not naturally, or normally feed God’s prophet; but at God’s word Elijah was fed: **Morning and evening . . . bread and meat.** Remember Mary’s submissive words to Gabriel: **Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according your word.** (Luke 1:38) With regard to ministering ravens, God’s will is, as with Mary, simply done.

Let it be to me according your word. These words set me to thinking about the deadweight of paper, about what happens to scriptural passages in the printing process, or format.⁴ The Word to the eye is not the same as the Word in your ear! And the Word preached is not the same as some conversation overhead in a public

⁴ I have shared before about my re-written boarding pass. On the occasion that I was blessed to lead a young man, Dan, to the Lord and, at his request prayed for him to meet the woman he was to marry (a Proverbs 31 woman). I had forgotten my prayer when I met her. The Lord chided me, “Have you forgotten already who it was you prayed with Dan to meet?” The test was “I was to sit next to her (in Row 4 Seat A)” However, my boarding pass originally read Row 17, Seat C. Believing that it was all off, I had imagined the Lord’s appointment. However, the whole of row 17 was occupied! So the stewardess sent me to the head attendant. She glanced at it, “Oh, Row 4 Seat A. Young man, you are seated in this gentleman’s seat.” I was seated, totally astounded: the Lord had re-written my boarding pass in the air, so to speak. I had at least five witnesses to the original assigned seating!

space. Being on paper, flattens the Word—has a leveling, de-activating influence over the text. It is in that sense that the Bible may be a closed book, simply another printed volume gathering dust—a paper weight! Scripture has to be quickened to us! *Spoken to us! The Word lives by way of engagement. “Breathe on me breath of God.”*

There is plainly *so much here*. There are six “might acts of God” enumerated by Mary between v.50 to v. 55.⁵ Six remembrances of his promise to Abraham and to Israel: 1. mercy, 2. the breaking of spiritual pride, 3. the unseating of the mighty, 4. the exaltation of the lowly, 5. the filling of the hungry and 6. the sending away of the rich—empty. The scope and sequence of Mary’s Magnificat is immense, breathtakingly marvelous. It is inspired, revealed truth. All six of these mighty works derives from the **remembrance of his mercy as he spoke to our fathers**—they are the fulfillment of the promise uttered unto Abraham. And by the keeping of that promise, God shows himself worthy of love and praise. Love must always precede the praise in the proper, experiential order of things. These works have the cumulative effect of strengthening our faith *because faith is the main thing because it is by faith that we are the children of Abraham and inheritors of the promise*.

Mary’s soul magnifies and her spirit rejoices that in **looking upon the humble estate of his servant** (her), God has replicated his work in creation, of making something out of nothing—or a somebody, out of a nobody. Since the conception of Jesus, she has been exalted—**all generations will call me blessed**. (v. 48) *God has exalted her*—bringing honor, blessing, uniqueness and monumental significance to her, before just a country girl, a virgin and a Jew. She was “lowly” and so, “hungry for good things,” and good things have *come to her* and filled her up! This is a great God thing⁶. She knows it and she wants Elizabeth (and us) to know it, too. Yet throughout she remains simple, calm, uncomplicated—grace improves her. She has her order right in that she publishes God’s *goodwill towards her*, his regard for her, first and only then does she proceed from greatest grace—to the works, and gifts. She reverses God, openly acknowledges that he is neither deaf, nor ignorant—but high, holy and worshipful. Not dead, irrelevant, distant, abstract or redundant!

What a strange soul is this woman’s! Such *great things hidden* under such a lowly, humble exterior. Hidden, secret. These adjectives are important for the works of God are indeed hidden until they are revealed, brought into reality, into view. As with Elizabeth (or our own Martha), no one saw the coordination and comprehensiveness of God’s involvement *ahead of time*; it comes into view as it unfolds. Not matter how unlikely it may seem, the fire will go out . . . it does not spread, it does no further harm. How amazing! We might say, of course, the promise is too strong for the fire, it overruled the dangers of forest fire! By faith, the fire was

⁵ These are the **great and mighty things that you have not known**—Jeremiah 33:3. They are not known until they are revealed to us, hidden until then.

⁶ This experience is Mary’s spiritual Exodus, out of bondage to boredom and death, a path of emancipation (a setting free which is bigger than racial, black or white because it is for all mankind, the entire human race. “A thoroughfare for freedom beat across the wilderness—“ from “America the Beautiful,” v.2.

doused, the water, thought ineffectual for gasoline fires, may actually have been extraneous. The might of God extinguished the blaze. Why aren't these things obvious to us from the start?

Luther argues that our **wretched unbelief** always “hinders” God from working great works in us—bad for us and bad to us! Unbelief keeps us from experiencing and knowing, acknowledging those divine works which are occurring. Because we don't believe it, we don't see it. But if we believe . . . we see.

Note: when we desire to be filled and to have aplenty before hunger and want arrive . . . when we lay up provision against future hunger (scorning our daily bread by stock and store) and critical need, we no longer feel *the need for either God, or his works.*⁷ That is why hungering is paired with, but comes before satisfaction, before being filled. **Blessed are those who hunger and thirst, they shall be filled** doesn't work where hunger is unknown. What sort of “faith” is that? A faith that trusts in God when you feel and know you have goods laid by *whereby you are quite able to help yourself?!* You don't need God's help if all that's needed is to fetch a jar of canned beans from the root cellar, or a tin can from the pantry!

Furthermore, **wretched unbelief** makes cowards of us all in this world. That is why we often see God's word, the truth and the right defeated. Wrong triumphs because we remain silent. We do nothing (remain silent, do not rebuke, do not speak out, or move to prevent it) and let things go as they may because we are afraid. They may attack us and makes us poor, and we imagine that we might perish and be laid flow forever—whereas God has promised to *regard the lowly and to raise up them who are oppressed. Are we with God in this?!* Hence, no ravens, no word, no rain! We do not believe God, or live with faith! No wonder we are excluded from the promises, and the comforts. How should God put out the fire with such a one? Does he not say he will unseat the mighty? pull down the powerful— we have but to wait, in faith to see. I think we have need to review Isaiah 47 where God rebukes the triumphant Babylon, the mighty oppressors of Israel:

**47:6 I was angry with my people;
I profaned my heritage;
I gave them into your hand;
you showed them no mercy;
on the aged you made
your yoke exceedingly heavy.
7 You said, “I shall be mistress forever,”
so that you did not lay these things to heart
or remember their end.
8 Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures,
who sit securely,**

⁷ God has not changed, or moved away from us in this world. No, we have insulated ourselves with our material prosperity, *with lifestyle choices based on surplus and ample supply*. In this regard, some deprivation might, like some suffering, prove ultimately good for the soul. Just so, it is our being in hiding that convinces us of our present danger, or peril.

**who say in your heart,
 “I am, and there is no one besides me;
 I shall not sit as a widow
 or know the loss of children”:
 9 These two things shall come to you
 in a moment, in one day;
 the loss of children and widowhood
 shall come upon you in full measure,
 in spite of your many sorceries
 and the great power of your enchantments.**

Upon, hearing this, now we must decide: *Did God say this or no?* Only to those who have the eyes (faith) to see will it appear as it truly is⁸. God did deal with the Chaldeans, in good time. The prophet said, “Just wait and see,” says the Lord. **I will appear**, I will act, I will reduce, intervene . . . **I will answer you**, I will announce it either by prophet, or raven heralds. It may take some time, it may take a very, very long time. What is that to the Lord?

And that is why Mary says, **He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy 55 as he spoke to our fathers.** (vv. 54-55) It was 430 years from the promise to the Law—and prior to the Lord Jesus’ coming there was a 400 year prophetic silence! But, what matters, is that it came to pass. The promise was kept. “If we lived Christian lives, and led them (unbelievers) to Christ in kindness, there would be a proper response.” “Who would want to be a Christian when Christians are so unChristian?” (Luther, p.197)

We must stop trusting in other men’s prayers and pray prayers of our own—prayer birthed in a faithful, trusting and loving heart. For the heart is where it is all determined—for good or for ill. Surrender the heart to God and, then, wait to see what he will do. It’s time for us to think for ourselves . . . just as Mary did! She was indeed enlivened, enlightened and exalted by her God . . . the same God who longs to have his way also with you.

Amen.

⁸ We might observe, at this point, that it is actually good that some Christians do not evangelize because the faith they have is not worth giving away!