

MAGNIFICAT  
 December 12, 2004  
 Luke 1: 46-55

For centuries, prophets told of a great leader who was to come to save Israel.

For centuries, prophecies rang out – even in times of exile and defeat – of one who was to come to rule in righteousness and peace.

For centuries, people turned to these prophecies, and hope rose up within them – even in times of trouble, or war, of exile, of defeat.

Isaiah said it in the passage we read this morning. He says

*Be strong, do not fear,  
 Your God will come.  
 Then he goes on to say  
 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened  
 and the ears of the deaf unstopped.  
 Then will the lamb leap like the deer,  
 and the tongue of the dumb shout for joy.*

*.....  
 ...the ransomed of the lord will return.  
 They will enter Zion with singing;  
 Everlasting joy will crown their heads.  
 Gladness and joy will overtake them,  
 And sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

Listen to the prophet Zephaniah:

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;  
 Shout, O Israel!  
 Rejoice and exult with all your heart,  
 O daughter Jerusalem!  
 The Lord your God is in your midst,  
 He will exult over you with loud singing  
 as on the day of a festival.  
 at that time I will bring you home,  
 at that time I will gather you;  
 for I will make you renowned and praised  
 among all the people of the earth,  
 when I restore your fortunes  
 before your eyes, says the Lord.*

Isaiah and Zephaniah had songs to sing even in the oppression of Assyrian captivity – songs of hope and songs of salvation.

Elizabeth had a song to sing:

*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear...blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord said to her will be accomplished.* (Luke 1: 42-45)

Elizabeth, barren for many years, was now expecting her first child; and her niece, Mary, was also expecting a child. They were both to bear special sons, who would bring about fulfillment of God's promise.

Mary responds, also in song. She was a young girl when she sang her song, thirteen or fourteen probably, certainly no more than sixteen. She was, like most girls her age, promised to a man she hardly knew.

Let's imagine for a bit what it must have been like for Mary. It scares her to think about leaving home to marry him. But it doesn't frighten her nearly as much as some of the things that have been happening to her lately. Every time she thinks about that angel her stomach does flip flops. The news the angel brought her was no news for a little girl – it should have been given to a grown woman. And Mary wonders if she can bear it, if she can bear a son, the son of God, who will rule over the house of David forever.

The whole thing was so strange – the thing with the angel – she wonders if it really happened. If it did, what will happen to her? What will people say? That God chose a teenager. And one who is already engaged to someone else, to have his baby? Now who on earth is going to believe that? But if it didn't happen, well, somehow that that would be worse. To go back to her ordinary everyday existence, back to her future as she had believed it would be – no, as hard as the other is to believe, it is better than not believing. And that is why she answers the angel "I am the Lord's servant" – how in the world had she thought to say that? – "May it be to me as you have said," she had said with sudden newfound confidence. Luke 1: 38)

At the same time, she is scared, so scared she asks her parents if she can leave town for a while, and go see her cousin, Elizabeth. Elizabeth is much older than she is, older than her mother even, but Elizabeth has always treated her as a friend, like a person, not like a kid, and she needs a friend now. So she goes, and on the journey she has lots of time to worry. What will Joseph say? What if he breaks their engagement? What if her parents disown her? Never mind the shame. How will she take care of herself and the baby all alone, with no where to live, no way to get food, no one to help her?

By the time Mary gets to Elizabeth's, she's a wreck, but at the sight of her beloved cousin she forgets all her worries. Elizabeth is six months pregnant and astonishingly beautiful, not by the world's standards of course, for she is old – but full of joy and radiance. Her eyes are clear and full of light. Elizabeth sees Mary staring at her big

belly and laughs, “Blessed are you among women” Elizabeth says “and blessed is the child you will bear.”

Mary can hardly believe her ears. Has that angel been here too? How does Elizabeth know? And if she does know, why doesn't it bother her? Can't she see what a mess this is going to be? But no, Elizabeth is not concerned. She takes young Mary in her arms and tells her everything will be alright. She offers total acceptance. And that's when Mary begins to sing her song. “My soul praises the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.”

Mary's song comes out of her tradition. It contains echoes of a much older song, sung over a thousand years ago by her kinswoman, Hannah. Hannah's song is found in I Samuel.

Hannah, like Elizabeth, was old and barren, and God heard her prayer and gave her a child named Samuel. When that baby boy was born, Hannah took him to the temple and sang too.

“My heart rejoices in the Lord, in the Lord my (head) is lifted high,” she sang ““The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumble are armed with strength.” (I Samuel 2) It is a song Mary may have heard before, or else the theme is so universal it just appears whenever God stirs people's hearts.

What Hannah and Elizabeth and Mary all have in common besides their pregnancies, is that each of them knows she has received God's blessing.

Mary is all but overwhelmed by what's happening to her. “From now on all generations will call me blessed.” A little self-centered, you say? Well, after all she is a teenager, half little girl who has spent the last few days numb with fear. Out from under that fear, she is wildly excited. “For the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.” God has blessed her in her low income status, has made her a promise which she believes, and that is the definition of faith, my friends, faith that births hope, faith in the substance of things unseen.

“His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation.” Mary's song continues. She fears him alright. But she believes what she sees in Elizabeth's eyes, what she has no way of knowing for sure. “He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.” Mary sings, but already the words are turning in her mouth. “He has brought down ruler from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.” Her, she means, God has put down all her fears and has lifted her up, low as she is. This is what the words mean, isn't it? She's just singing a song about how happy she is, how thankful she is, but then why does she keep seeing lots of people as she sings: kings and generals, leaving their thrones and armies behind, beggars sitting down to the greatest of feasts. It's all backwards. Everything's upside down!

But the words to her song keep coming, pouring from her lips before she can think about them at all. Mary is no longer singing her song – the song is singing her. “He has filled the hungry with good things but sent the rich away empty. Where are these words coming from? Little Mary is no politician. She is not a revolutionary. She just wants to sing a happy song, but she has become an articulate radical, a prophet singing about a world where the last has become first and the first has become last. Furthermore, she puts everything in the past tense as though the hungry had already been fed and the rich sent empty away. How can that be? Her baby has yet to be born and already she’s naming his accomplishments. Her faith is in things not seen. Her faith comes from outside herself, and that is why we call her blessed.

Mary was just a girl, an immature and frightened girl who had the good sense to believe an angel. She was the mother of the Son of God, with faith enough to move mountains, to sing about the triumphs of her son as if his life were complete and he had ascended to sit on the right hand of God.

Mary was not like us. She was like us.

She just wanted to be blessed in a small way but she ended us changing the future of the world. She wanted to sing a happy song, but she ended up singing revolution, singing the Lord’s upside down kingdom.

She was not like us. She was like us.

When we allow Jesus to be born in us there is no telling, no telling at all, what will happen.