

# THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

## LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

### **The Magnificat**

My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;  
For he has regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden.  
For behold, from this day all generations will call me blessed;  
For the mighty one has done great things to me, and holy is his name.  
And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts;  
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has exalted the holy;  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent empty away.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
as he spoke to our fathers,  
to Abraham and to his seed forever.  
(From the Book of Common Worship)

**Sunday, December 12, 2010**

### **Katie Geneva Cannon, Guest Lectionary Commentator**

Annie Scales Rogers Professor of Christian Ethics, Union Presbyterian Seminary,  
Richmond, VA

**Lection - Luke 1:46-56** (New Revised Standard Version)

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

### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

## **Joyous Expectation**

Of all the stories in canonized scripture that describe visitations of the spirit, “The Song of Mary,” commonly referred to as the *Magnificat*, is one of the most dramatically moving events. This infancy narrative of the Gospel of Luke captures one of the highest points in human experience—the announcement of a coming hope that surpasses our greatest imagination. With shuddering awe and profound reverence one approaches Advent as the season of joyous expectation, a time of anticipated assurance of the fulfillment of God’s promise to heal the soul from whatever causes our lives to sag like a heavy load.

The vast majority of African American congregations embody unyielding confidence in God’s faithfulness despite existential evidence to the contrary. In other words, we know the realities of overworked mothers, exploited fathers, substandard housing, failing schools, drug infested neighborhoods, and gang violence. And yet, each year we enthusiastically prepare to receive anew the saving act of God in Jesus Christ. Like Mary, this gift of grace dwells within and invites us, regardless of our social class strata, to embrace a life throbbing with unbound energy and possibilities. That which appears stagnant becomes an inexhaustible supply of fertility and health. For in-depth study of living on the verge of inspiring, life-changing breakthroughs, see Renita J. Weems’, *Showing Mary: How Women Can Share Prayers, Wisdom, And the Blessings of God.*<sup>1</sup>

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 1:46-56**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

The line of liberative reasoning that serves as a Christian corrective of institutionalized calibrated violence during the Season of Advent goes like this: for a race of people who have suffered centuries of exploitative oppression and perverse cruelties due to chattel slavery, followed with one hundred tumultuous years of disparaging and derogative laws that enforced the brutality of racial segregation, there is a genuine longing for freedom from statutory social bondage. From the earliest of times, African American ancestors prayerfully searched the Scriptures for deliverance that embraces the higher demands of the commonwealth of God on this terrestrial sphere.

When it comes to visceral connections of text interfacing with our real-life context, in countless ways, “Mary’s Song of Praise” is fresh with resonations that celebrate the irrevocability of the divine will of God. Mary’s song connects to the power that girds spiritual presence, blessing us with long awaited gifts of wholeness. In other words, “The *Magnificat*,” writes M.H. Shepherd, Jr., “is a beautiful summary of the Old Testament hope of God’s redemption of his people, as it is brought to concrete realization in the Incarnation, in the womb of God’s handmaiden of ‘low estate.’”<sup>2</sup>

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

Overall attention is given in this text to the Spirit, an unblinkable recognition of the power that makes all things possible. In this passionate poetic hymn, Mary is the speaker summoning the audience to hear what God is doing. Finding words to explain this encounter with God, Mary uses singular personal pronouns as a proclamation formula which serves to emphasize the specificity of her spiritual visitation.

The phrase in Luke 1:48, “for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant,” identifies the particular person for whom this message from God is meant. By designating Mary’s social class status, this verse bears the overtones of its classic significance. Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder contends:

**Luke did not compose this song. It is a hymn of the ‘anawim, the “poor” of the Lord, fashioned for God’s use. The “poor of the Lord” was a designation for children, widows, foreigners, and others who were economically and socially impoverished. According to a hymn, the Lord uplifts the poor and lowly and brings down the rich and mighty.<sup>3</sup>**

Namely, the multilayered economic portrait in this song functions to indicate the inclusivity of God’s commonwealth. The ordinariness of Mary’s existence is placed in juxtaposition with the coming act of redemption, alongside an implicit invitation for us to recognize what it means to be pregnant with divine possibilities.

The second half of verse 48 states that the reason for the divine visit is based on an act in the present that continues to the future. It proclaims the message that even if we are roughed up and ground down and judiciously left out of the salvation story as active protagonists that the end has not come for the people of God. Crowder argues that Mary’s praise of God bears much resemblance to the song Hannah sang in response to the coming birth of her son, Samuel (I Sam. 1-2; see also the Song of Miriam, Exod 15:21). “The same God who enabled Hannah to conceive Samuel empowers a woman of Mary’s low status to conceive one greater than Samuel.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, Mary will be called blessed throughout the generations because she embodies the certitude of God’s promise. The meaning of advent is compressed into a concise theological summary. If, like Mary, we surrender ourselves to the divine will, we can be God’s agents of transformation.

Verses 49 to 55 are vividly expressed delineations that unquestionably declare God’s intimate acts of love not only for Mary but for each of us in relation to historical events. This oration is a comprehensive picture of Mary’s praise song of God’s attributes. With candor, she proclaims the message that God is holy, God is strong, and God is merciful.

To add emphasis to this comprehensive understanding of God, Mary announces how God “scatters the proud,” “brings down the powerful from their thrones,” “lifts up the lowly,” “fills the hungry with good things” and “sends the rich away empty.” Each of these proclamations signifies the attitude and activity that is needed in order to maintain a right relationship with God. Mary, like so many of the biblical characters, lived during periods in history when wealthy, affluent upper-classes dispossessed the poor and when priests placed undue emphasis upon sacrificial offerings with only slight attention to conduct.

Verses 54 and 55 advance the contemporary significance of Mary’s song by concluding that the core of this poetic text is a liberating message—regardless of our family of origin, birth arrangement, or location in the social order, our religious identity must intersect and directly align with ethical integrity.

### **Celebration**

This scripture gives voice to an external solution embodied in a long-range internal, resolution. Mary was chosen to fulfill this holy assignment, to be the mother of Jesus, as a result of unmerited grace. It was not due to anything that she was or had done. God chose Mary out of God’s own free, unfettered and sovereign will. Each day of our lives God extends to us an invitation for a spiritual transformation. Like Mary, we too experience unspeakable joy when we say “Yes!” to the particularity of our divine call.

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details of this passage include:

**Sounds:** Embryonic songs of evening vespers; ecstatic shouts of joy, lyrical musicality, nimble switching, poetic utterances—whimsical hums, moans, and howls that emerge when our soul magnifies the Lord and our spirit rejoices in God—even the sound of slithering silence;

**Sights:** Lowly servants; frightened women, men, and children seeking mercy; strong, potent arms scattering materialism to the wind; battering rams tumbling regally decorated thrones; bellies full of soul food; baffled rich folks wandering around in circles; and

**Smells:** Scrumptious, delicious food prepared for all who are hungry and the burning of aromatic incenses in the royal household.

### **Notes**

1. Weems, Renita J. Showing Mary: How Women Can Share Prayers, Wisdom, And the Blessings of God. West Bloomfield, MI: Warner Books, 2002.
2. Shepherd, M. H., Jr. “Magnificat.” The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 3. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962. p. 226.

3. Crowder, Stephanie B. "The Gospel of Luke." True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary. Brian K. Blount, Ed. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007. p. 161.

4. Ibid.