

We Sing with Mary

Luke 1:46-56

by Michael G. Lilienthal

As we prepare for the advent of our Lord, we take this evening to encounter him by examining the aspect of his mother, the blessed Virgin Mary.

As Lutherans, we tend to be uncomfortable speaking about Mary, because by virtue of being Lutheran, we're all bitter ex-Catholics. But I'm afraid that the general tendency of us Lutherans in regard to Mary is highly reactionary: we see how the Catholics have swung so far towards the honor of Mary that they assign her *hyperdulia*, defined as "the special veneration accorded the Blessed Virgin Mary because of her unique role in the mystery of Redemption, her exceptional gifts of grace from God, and her pre eminence among the saints,"¹ and we see how it often crosses into the territory of idolatry, and so we swing to the precise opposite side of the pendulum and mention the name of Mary only when it comes up in a Sunday's reading. I would like to caution us now not to throw out the baby with the bathwater, but instead to understand how we are to rightly regard Mary.

We can take some cues from the early church, within the first few centuries of Christianity's existence, when "Mary's unique role was honored. All people did call her blessed," as she prophesied they would, "and she became a model for faithful followers of Christ, not only for her humble obedience to God, but also for her patient suffering as

¹ Matthew Bunson, Answer to "EWTN Catholic Q&A," EWTN Global Catholic Network, http://www.ewtn.com/v/experts/showmessage_print.asp?number=388983&language=en.

the mother of the crucified Savior.”² We can regard her in much the same way, seeing how she did model the pious Christian life, both in active obedience and in passive suffering. No, we do not rely on any of Mary’s supposed merits; instead, our salvation we recognize comes from the active obedience of Christ to the whole Law, and his passive obedience in dying on the cross for our sins. Mary’s life was the Christian life, which is modeled after Christ – so we can see how she appropriated that life, in order to better learn how to do so ourselves. Whereas the Catholics pray, “Hail Mary full of Grace, the Lord is with thee,” we understand that this was the greeting of Gabriel the angel to the young virgin (in another translation: “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” [Luke 1:28]) and not a prayer commanded that Christians should repeat. We likewise understand the next portion of that prayer, “Blessed are thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus” as the greeting of Elizabeth to her cousin Mary (in another translation: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” [Luke 1:42]), and not our prayer to her. And by no means do we regard the end of that prayer (“Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death Amen”) as being Scriptural at all, but pure fiction and idolatrous fabrication. But as those greetings from Gabriel and Elizabeth are scriptural, we must accept that there is a scriptural understanding to them. So let us allow Scripture to interpret Scripture.

² Gregory L. Jackson, *Catholic, Lutheran, Protestant* (St. Louis: Martin Chemnitz Press, 1993), 195.

How do you regard St. Paul? He was a pious Christian, and a powerful teacher in the truths of God's Word, inspired to even record some of God's Word. What about Luther? He was also a pious Christian, a strong preacher and defender of the faith. How do you regard Abraham? A patriarch who was justified by faith, who even holds the faithful dead in his arms, as in the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:22). St. John? Another pious teacher and preacher, one whom Jesus loved and recorded some of God's Word under the Spirit's inspiration. Isaiah? A prophet inspired by God to bring comfort to those who hear and read his words. Is Mary different? Look at her song. It is called the "Magnificat" from the first word in the Latin version of the song, which means "it magnifies," and Luther sees in this word the whole theme of the song: "namely, the great works and deeds of God, for the strengthening of our faith, for the comforting of all those of low degree, and for the terrifying of all the mighty ones of earth."³ This is what Mary wishes to sing about, to teach us; and seeing this song, **we** may certainly **sing with Mary**.

I. We Magnify the Lord

This song, it must be said, is really the first Christmas Carol, and it rightly belongs to Mary, the first Christian, for as soon as the angel Gabriel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you," then she did indeed conceive this baby in her womb, the baby who was God her Savior (Luke 1:35). If nothing else, this should be impressive about Mary: that her

³ LW 21:306.

Christmas came before anyone else's, for the advent of her Lord had already come to her. She being the first Christian, therefore, we can see how she worshiped, and understand what that means for how we worship.

One thing that she did was she recognized the mightiness of the God who "has done great things for me." She sang about how God "has shown strength with his arm; / he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; / he has brought down the mighty from their thrones." This doesn't quite sound like the happy, nostalgic Christmas tunes we know and love. But the fact is, although "Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire" might give you a warm, fuzzy feeling, it and the carols like it by and large have far less doctrinal weight to them than the frank and powerful poetry of the blessed Virgin. Mary sings here of fear.

Fear is the natural reaction to the presence and revelation of God. When Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, "Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him" (Luke 1:12). Likewise, when the angel appeared to Mary, "she was greatly troubled" (Luke 1:29). And we know the familiar story of the "shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear" (Luke 2:8-9). Every time God or one of his messengers surrounded by his glory appears, in Old or New Testament, fear fills the hearts of the mortals who witness it. The first occasion of this occurred in the book of Genesis: "And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden...."

And [Adam] said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself'" (Gen. 3:8, 10). This fear of God's glory is an inheritance of all people, "just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned," including Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds, for we must recognize that we are nothing but dust and he is the mighty Creator of the world (Rom. 5:12).

This fear, therefore, must come upon the "proud," the "mighty," and the "rich" of whom Mary sings: "he has scattered the proud...he has brought down the mighty from their thrones...the rich he has sent away empty." Therefore Mary could rightly tremble. The presence of God means the destruction of the sinful. Where had God ever been more *present* than he was now, nestled in physical form within the womb of this girl? Since it would be her natural reaction to be terrified, the angel told her, "Do not be afraid, Mary" (Luke 1:30), and Elizabeth her cousin also encouraged her, "Blessed are you among women" (Luke 1:42).

Thus was Mary's terror converted into rejoicing, and so she sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord, / and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!" She was comforted in knowing that "the fruit of her womb" was something awesome given by God (Luke 1:42), in hearing that her faith had saved her, as Elizabeth further said, "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Luke 1:45), in being assured even before all this by the glorious messenger of God, "you have found favor with God" ("favor" being the Greek *χάρις*, also translated "grace") (Luke 1:30). Because the might of God which should have obliterated someone

so low instead meant her salvation and blessings forever for her, she burst into this

Magnificat:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

It is as though the Ark of the Covenant, which in the Old Testament indicated the presence of God, has been carried to a new place: previously, to worship God, his people had to make a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem (and on the way to sing psalms and hymns, sharing the promises and comforts of God with one another). Now God has made his pilgrimage to us and has come into our presence. Because of the descent of his Son into humanity, he is always before us, and may be worshiped freely – the transition marked by Mary’s liturgical chant of this hymn – and so we may likewise (and should) sing constantly, for we are constantly in God’s presence.

Take Mary’s example: God’s presence means your destruction or your salvation, so recognize your humble estate – and this is not a boast! There are plenty who boast about how humble they are in mock piety (for which reason they are called Pietists), but this is really the sheep’s wool of humility, cloaking the same wolf of pride. No, true humility “is nothing else than a disregarded, despised, and lowly estate, such as that of men who are poor, sick, hungry, thirsty, in prison, suffering, and dying.... Thus the word [humble estate] shows us plainly that the Virgin Mary was a poor, despised, and lowly maiden, who served God in her low estate, nor knew that it was so highly

esteemed by Him.”⁴ Boasting, instead, is rightly done, as Paul says, “of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Cor. 12:9). This boasting means plainly that we recognize our lowness and God’s height, and that therefore our reliance is wholly on him. This is what Mary has done, and she has praised him — magnified him! And she acknowledges his holiness, even saying, “holy is his name.” The name of God is his revelation, the way he shows himself to people. Mary confesses that God reveals himself in holiness.

And this is also her confession of who it is growing in her womb, for the angel had told her, “the child to be born will be called holy” (Luke 1:35). Holy is the name of God, and her child will be called holy. Therefore Mary’s son is God himself, and for this reason the entire Christian Church confesses that Mary is the Mother of God, which the early church confessed by the Greek term θεοτόκος, literally “God-bearer” — not because she somehow generated the deity within herself, but because the person to whom she gave birth was very God. See how recognizing Mary in this regard is in fact confessing something more about Jesus Christ and God than about Mary. The only quality Mary has here is that she was blessed with the grace of God, which turned his presence into not her destruction but her exaltation.

And here we see the great theme of Mary’s song: she sings of a Great Reversal, for while the “proud,” “mighty,” and “rich” are humbled, “those who fear him,” “those of humble estate,” and “the hungry,” are exalted. This reflects Jesus’ famous saying,

⁴ LW 21:313, 317.

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14).

II. We Recognize His Mercy

Even before this hymn, Mary demonstrated her faith by telling the angel, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). This was her pious humility. She recognized that she was deserving of nothing, for in the song itself she sings of “the humble estate of his servant.” But in her undeserving state, the grace and mercy of God came to her, so that she became one exalted by God to be an instrument in his plan of salvation, and further to be a teacher for us who must be saved, to be a sister in the community of believers.

Look how Mary herself demonstrates the way people are to speak of both God and herself: we “magnify the Lord,” but of herself she says, “all generations will call me blessed.” This is the Greek μακαριοῦσι, related to μακαρία, a word which means “happiness” or “blessing.” Jesus uses the same word in the Beatitudes to describe all Christians. We call Mary μακαρία because we observe how she is mercifully granted to be exalted to the presence of God, because he has done great things to her, and in this way, we may see Mary as the “personification of Israel” and “pattern for all those of low estate whom God visits with his merciful presence and raises up as an act of pure grace.”⁵ The proclamation, calling the Mother of God “the Blessed Virgin,” is not as the Catholics teach a *hyperdulia* reverence of Mary, but rather the recognition of an example

⁵ Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 85.

of God's mercy at work, looking on "the humble estate of his servant" and doing "great things" for her.

And how she recognized these great things is caught up in the names she uses for God: "Lord," or *Adonai*, the Hebrew word which took the place of God's holy name *Yahweh* in common usage, "God," *Elohim*, the expression of God's superiority over all other supposed deities, "Savior," the one who would bring rescue only because of his mercy, "holy," the one who was alone sinless and yet came among sinners to exchange places with them.

The language of Mary's song reflects the looked-for salvation as it was experienced in Israel's history, for her song ends:

He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

Like the *Benedictus* of Zechariah, the whole Gospel message is found in Mary's song in the "remembrance" of God's promised mercy to Abraham. It was this same remembrance that caused him to help his servant Israel when the nation was enslaved in Egypt.

Let's examine that period for a moment. Did you know that the Mother of God is not the first Biblical figure with the name "Mary"? In Hebrew, the name is "Miriam," which was the name of Moses' sister. I doubt God chose someone with this name by accident, since throughout the Gospel (and even in the Old Testament, dealing with the patriarchs) he pays close attention to the names of his servants, and changes them when

necessary. Miriam or Mary are uncertain in meaning, but the best guess is that they probably mean “sea of bitterness.” Think of Miriam. She lived in Israel’s most sorrowful time, when a sea of bitterness came from each Hebrew’s eyes. Her brother, Moses, was “drawn out of the water,” whence comes his name—just as Israel was rescued through the Red Sea. Once Israel came to the other side of the Red Sea, Miriam was led to sing, “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; / the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea” (Ex. 15:21). Immediately afterward, Israel came to the bitter waters of Marah (Hebrew for “bitter”) which could not be drunk, yet at the command of God Moses changed the bitter water so that it became sweet and nourishing.

Now we speak of Jesus as the greater Moses, with many parallels in life, and as Moses delivered the people from slavery in Egypt, Jesus delivered all mankind from an even more bitter bondage, to sin and Satan.

In both Mary and Miriam is represented the low and sad estate of God’s people, from which they were in desperate need of deliverance. We could see in Mary’s case that her name was especially appropriate, as Simeon prophesied to her, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:35). Jesus did indeed cause division, and the exalted were indeed made humble, and the humble exalted; for this reversal was so great that even death came to mean life! This son of Mary’s died before her very eyes, when was fulfilled Simeon’s prophecy, and there the sea of bitterness flowed in her tears. But her

sorrowing was turned into joy much as the waters of Marah were changed from bitter to sweet, when her son was raised from the dead, meaning the salvation of all mankind, including herself! She foresaw even that this would occur, and this led her to the joyful song she sings now. So let her song become our song, and let her example become our practice.

The great Lutheran theologian Martin Chemnitz wrote of Mary, “I want nothing taken away from the dignity of the blessed Virgin Mary. For I embrace with the greatest reverence of mind what she herself sings: ‘Henceforth all generations will call me blessed, for He who is mighty has done great things for me.’ But I think that the Virgin Mary is rightly proclaimed blest if those things are attributed to her which are both in agreement with the Scripture and can be proved from there, so that the name of the Lord may be holy.”⁶ Similarly our Lutheran Confessions state: “Even though she is worthy of the highest honors, she does not want to be put on the same level as Christ but to have her example considered and followed.”⁷

Mary humbled herself before the God who did great things to her — who used one as lowly and humble as her to bring to earth the Savior of mankind, the Savior of his mother, too. Mary wept at the cross to see this son of hers die, and rejoiced that his tomb was empty and that salvation was complete! Mary understood that the Son of God would bring about the Great Reversal of humbling the proud and exalting the

⁶ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, vol. 1, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House 2007), 383.

⁷ Ap. AC XXI:27, *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 232.

lowly, and especially the Great Exchange of taking the sinfulness of all mankind onto himself and giving us his holiness. Mary is a hero of faith, like Abraham, Moses, Peter, Paul, John, Luther, and all our other sainted brothers and sisters who are washed in the blood of the Lamb. This song is Mary's expression of her faith, in which she submits to God's will.

How should we regard Mary? Look to the person sitting next to you. You sing hymns with that person each week here in God's presence. In the same way, **sing with Mary.**

Amen.