

## Hopes in History for Real Justice

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Luke 1:46-55; Hebrews 10:6-7; Micah 5:2

When we read through the text of the *Magnificat*, we cannot help but notice that the hopes and expectations we find there were not for a spiritual peace deep in the soul of the devoutly religious leading a contemplative life. Mary's *Magnificat* follows the witness and testimony of another Mary, the Miriam who stood alongside Moses relishing the victory God had given Israel over the Egyptians with their exodus through the Red Sea. As you recall, the Israelites rushed out of Egypt in such a hurry that they couldn't wait for the bread to rise. But once they escaped from slavery in Egypt, where were they to go, and how would they know the way? According to Scriptural accounts, the Lord went before them, leading the way, right up to the dead end known as the Red Sea, with water blocking the way before them, and the Egyptians pressing in from behind. Moses stood before the people, and said, "Fear not, stand firm, and you will see the salvation of the Lord." (Exodus 14:13) The wind blew, the waters parted, and the Israelites marched on through the Red Sea. The Egyptians followed, not walking on foot, but riding in chariots, looking to overtake their runaway slaves. But the Lord wouldn't have it. Their chariot wheels got stuck in the mud of the sea bed, and as they struggled, God closed the path that He had opened. In response, Miriam composed what is the oldest remembered song in biblical history. It was a song of unrepentant glee, as if to say, "Hurray for our side!" "*Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously: horse and rider he has cast into the sea!*" (Exodus 15:21) It could be that there was once a rhyme that was lost in translation from the original Hebrew; but what isn't lost in translation is the great joy Miriam felt at the sight of her enemy's defeat.

That is precisely the Spirit behind Mary's *Magnificat*. It is a song looking for a day of reckoning, the day when God's justice would be established on earth. "*God has shown the strength of His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. The hungry He has filled with good things; and the rich He has sent away empty.*" (Luke 1:51-53) Yes, empty! Hurray for the lowly! Hooray for God's justice! Hooray for the arrival of the kingdom of God. That's the hope that animated God's people in Jesus' day. It wasn't a spiritual peace but a political victory, not some sort of inner serenity but the triumph of real justice for the poor, the lowly, the left out and overlooked! I am not saying that Jesus came to confirm the expectations that formed these hopes. But before we can know how Jesus transformed the hopes of God's people as he fulfilled them, first we've got to appreciate the nature of these hopes; and here in this *Magnificat* the hopes expressed are not for a better tenor, more powerful soprano, or a more versatile alto. Mary's *Magnificat* is looking for a political turnaround, an economic rebound, and real justice for the poor.

The Middle East today is as it was back then, a caldron of instability and resistance. It was a headache for the powerful who were looking to establish some sort of peace, and it was a danger to the powerless who were often caught in the crossfire of competing forces as collateral damage. That was their world way back then, and it is still like that today. What do you think Hamas wants for Christmas, or Hezbollah in Lebanon, or the Taliban in Afghanistan, or Al Qaida wherever? Chances are that this wish list includes some references to justice for the powerless and violence against the powerful. The fact is that history of the biblical witness affirms this zeal for justice; but we must also remember that Jesus rejected appeals to violence as the means to peace on earth and justice for the poor. We have buried these sentiments under layer upon layer of liturgical canticles, services of the hour, and countless efforts to insulate “deeply religious” moments from life in the real world. But the Gospel of Luke has preserved a clear record of a Jesus who understands and embraces this historic role as the long-awaited Messiah.

He was baptized under the banner of a royal coronation psalm, and called to be God’s Son and Servant, sent to rule, our Prince of Peace. From the Jordan River – with his baptism by John, God’s voice from heaven, and the Spirit’s help in the wilderness – we next find Jesus at a synagogue in Nazareth, where he takes the scroll and reads from it in a text that is known as his Inaugural Address, “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captive, sight to the blind, and freedom for all who are in bondage.*” (Luke 4:18) Mary’s *Magnificat* and Jesus’ Inaugural Address affirm this historic hope for a Messiah, sent to deliver on God’s promise of peace, securing the gift of freedom, with love from on high and justice for God’s people. Jesus’ focus was fixed on this hope and promise from the forty days he spent in the wilderness to his three hours endured on the cross. In between, there is his memorable sermon from the plain – blessed are the poor, love your friends and enemies, forgive and you will be forgiven, be merciful as our Father in heaven is merciful. There are parables about finding the lost with the Prodigal Son, and helping the needy with the Good Samaritan. As we follow Jesus in his ministry through Galilee, we see him reaching out to strangers, including outsiders, embracing the excluded, rejected, undervalued and neglected.

The truth is that Jesus came to lead God’s people in the way that leads to true life, which is not just life as God wills it in heaven, but life as God wants it on earth. Jesus intends to help us understand what God means by peace, and he creates a community where this peace finds a foothold in our world. Jesus intends to help us understand how God’s righteousness serves as the measure of the right relations we are to have with one another. And again, the community of the church is where the rubber of God’s righteousness hits the road of real life with our willingness to stand with the needy, to stand up for what’s right, to speak out for those who otherwise would have no voice. There are lots of ways that this can happen. Our Food Pantry and Clothing Closet are one such instance of standing with those who need God’s help and ours. Health kits and school kits for Lutheran World Relief remind us of how wide our reach can be when we work with

others to accomplish God's aims and desires. In the Gospel of Luke Jesus touches all these bases and more. And if that's not enough, Luke writes the Book of Acts to recount how the presence of our Risen Lord, alive in the Body of Christ, namely, the church, is empowered by the Holy Spirit to find new and creative ways for making God's love real through the lives we live, the service we render, and the witness we offer. Here is how our Second Lesson from Hebrews says it: "*Sacrifices and offerings – animal sacrifices and burnt offerings – you have not desired*", but a Son and Servant who takes the scroll of the book and says, "*See, I have come to do your will.*" (Hebrews 10:6-7) That's what God wants, and that's what Jesus was offering in the synagogue with his Inaugural Address. He took the scroll, opened it, and read aloud about the will of God to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for all in bondage. It is clear that Jesus is one who has come to do God's will; and what is more, we are an extension of that promise and commitment – living God's peace, working for justice, caring about the poor, reaching out with help for the needy.

It all begins with the great surprise with which God surprises us when he sends a baby to Bethlehem. Here's how Micah says it in the First Lesson: "*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are the littlest of clans, from you shall come the great one who is to rule Israel.... He shall feed his flock in the strength of the Lord.*" (Micah 5:2) It all begins in Bethlehem; but it certainly doesn't end there, not for Jesus and not for us. Sometimes we do ourselves no favors with the traditions we've cultivated and the signals they send. For instance, we have turned the *Magnificat* into a work of musical art, with its many choral settings designed to fill pristine chapels with the sound of beautiful arias joining priestly tones for the Service of Evening Prayer. But *Miriam's Song* had something far different in view, God's victory at the Red Sea, and something far different in mind, the freedom of the Exodus and the struggle for justice that would some ensue.

The sweet Christmas carol that bears Bethlehem's name can also mislead when it come to understanding the miracle that surprises us at Bethlehem. It seems to transport us out of this hustle-and-bustle world of ours into another world, more serene, more angelic, more at peace. "*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.*" Then, we hear of a message that is trying to makes its way into our world. "*Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light. The hope and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*" What are these hopes? Verse 4 directs our focus to Jesus. "*O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sins and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell. Oh, come to us, abide in us, our Lord Immanuel.*" (Lutheran Book Worship, #41) Again, it all begins in Bethlehem; but it certainly doesn't end there. There's more to come, and we're that more. Simply put, somewhere between the Babe in the Manger who came to us then and the Risen Lord who abides in us now, we've got to find the strength of the Lord who calls us to extend His ministry of justice and embody His presence and peace, by sharing the love God gives through the sacrifice of a life well-lived, a life of dedicated to listening for God's Word and following ... in Jesus name. Amen