Mary, full of grace

Will Fitzgerald

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

December 11, 2106

Luke 1:46-55

Week three of Advent, week three of looking at grace in the Advent passages. This morning, we will be looking at Mary’s song of praise, called “The Magnificat.”

46 And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

50 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 powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Do you remember the first thing the angel Gabriel said to Mary, when he came to announce her upcoming pregnancy?

(Like 1: 28b) “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”

I think many of us are familiar with the “catholic” version, the “Ave Maria,” which is based on this passage, where the greeting is: “Hail Mary, Full of Grace.”

There is such a strong intertwining and mingling of the ideas of “grace” and “favor” and “mercy” and “blessing.”

So, we get phrases like, “favored one,” “looked with favor,” “all generations with call me blessed,” and “the Mighty One has done great things for me” in Mary’s song.

If Mary is so favored, if she is “full of grace,” what does that mean?

I am no expert on Roman Catholic theology, but I believe that orthodox Roman Catholic teaching is God gave Mary a special gift at the beginning of her life: at conception, she “was preserved free from all stain of original sin,” and saved from the kind of sinful life the rest of us live. She was free of all the moral failures and deficiencies we live with every day.

Some of the early Anabaptist teachers believed a kind of caricature of this. People like Menno believed that Jesus’s body was not the same as our body, that it was a “divine body” and his divine body passed through Mary’s body like it was passing through a pipe, unaffected by her failures. I guess this could be seen as a kind of grace, because who doesn’t desire that their children not repeat the patterns of sinfulness we ourselves engage in?

I’m not here to engage with the Roman Catholic doctrine. I’m especially not here to defend Menno’s divine flesh theology; for as far as I know, all Anabaptist theologians gave that up a long time ago, and are more likely to profess the orthodox position that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine.

But if we want to understand grace, I believe we can learn from Mary’s song.

I hope you won’t be offended or surprised that I’ll treat this song as Mary’s words? It’s a bit of a stretch to think Mary thought up all these words on the spot, and somehow they were recorded verbatim. I don’t think that’s how gospel writing worked. But the truth of God’s intervention in history through Mary shines through this song.

So, in this song, what does Mary count as God’s favor, God’s grace?

First, Mary rejoices because God has regarded her *lowliness*. She knows she is not the kind of person people think God pays attention to. She’s a peasant, she’s young, she’s a *she*. What has she done to deserve God’s work in her life? The answer is (let’s be honest): nothing. (I think even standard Roman Catholic doctrine, with its high view of Mary, would agree). Yet, God *has* chosen her. This thought, which at first troubled her mind, brings out the praise and worship in her.

Second, Mary rejoices that she is part of God fulfilling the promises made to God’s people. God promised Mary’s great-great-great ancestor Abraham that God would save God’s people. God has “remembered his mercy.”

Third, Mary delights that God has worked through the humble people like herself to bring this about. Many people hear an echo of Hannah’s song in Mary’s song, and it’s true that God has worked through the meek as well as the mighty to achieve God’s purposes.

Fourth, Mary is grateful that God is overturning things, scattering the proud and powerful, giving food to those who are hungry, and emptying out those who are rich in material things.

Mary teaches us that grace is about God noticing us, even though we are not, or, at least, do not feel like are, worth noticing. Mary teaches us that grace is about participating in God’s great historical drama of saving a people to praise God’s name. Mary teaches us that God is overturning the way things are, with new things.

We sing a hymn, “God is here among us,” with the words, “Come, abide within me, let my soul, like Mary, be thine earthly sanctuary.” (The Worship Book, #16).

How can we be Mary like? How can we experience Mary’s grace?

Like Mary, let us be grateful to God that God has noticed *us*, in our lowliness, in our faults and failures and weaknesses. And God notices us, not to swat us, but to love us, and do things through us.

Like Mary, let us look beyond what appear to the be obvious political facts. For Mary, that was about living in territory occupied by powers which were against what she believed in, and constrained her life. For us, it may be that we look at the state of our country and the state of the world, and are tempted to despair. But God’s mercy is present throughout the generations; something important is going on, and God is overturning the powerful.

Like Mary, let us rejoice that we, “who were once no people,” are now part of God’s people. Let’s share the good news that God’s mercy is available to all, and let us strive to be part of the new thing that God is doing in the world.

I wonder what one or two things will thaw for us this week, or what new courage with might take to face the challenges in front of us.