

Two Canticles For Christmas:

I. The Magnificat: A young girl and her hopes.”

Text: "Fear not Mary, for you have found favor with God.”

Luke 1:30

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The Infancy Narratives in the Gospel of Luke are a treasure to behold. They are powered with theological depth but delivered in simple stories, albeit wrapped in an aura of mystery. Luke is a careful writer. The first two Gospels, Mark and Matthew are grand and meaningful, but on first look they appear to have been written in haste, more like a news reporter would file his daily stories before the deadline. Luke, on the other hand, carefully researched his information and organized it around consistent themes. When I say researched, I mean like you would prepare an important term paper, or a Doctoral Thesis, or even a weekly sermon, if it is done correctly.

Christians believe that the Bible is inspired, and it sounds simple enough. But I have never felt that believing in inspiration meant that the Biblical authors simply bowed their heads forward and waited while the Heavenly Father poured his words into their heads and then took hold of their hands to write it all down. No, like the rest of us mortals, they had to struggle with what God was saying and how to write it down. The Eternal Truth was communicated through the personalities of the authors selected. They were individuals, aligned to each other in a common purpose, but also as different as three brothers can be from the same home. Luke is a good scholar, as well as a good story teller. When you enter the pages of Luke, it does not take long to realize that you are in another genre completely from Matthew and Mark. John again is another kind of story.

The stories surrounding the birth of Jesus are especially unique and original. How very original is often overlooked. Mark and John do not mention the birth of Jesus at all. Matthew tells the story of the Wise Men who came to Bethlehem following the ancient star in the eastern sky. He overlooked the angels singing in the shepherd's field, if he knew the story at all.

Luke was fascinated with the angelic visits to earth and in the songs or canticles which accompanied them. We are focused on the Magnificat today, the Song which Mary sang when she visited her Aunt Elizabeth. But Luke also includes the Gloria in Excelsis Deo which the angels sang to the Shepherds, The Benedictus, a song of thanks from Zechariah concerning the Birth of John the Baptist, and The Nunc Dimittis, where Simeon having met the Christ Child, declares that he is ready to leave the earth. The other Gospel writers do not mention them at all.

After his brief prologue to Theophilus, where he notes that he “has followed all things closely” from the various witnesses, Luke moves on to the visitation of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah the priest, whose wife Elizabeth was growing on in years, and still childless. And as happens often in the Scripture, God promised to provide them a son, as He did for Sarah and Hannah, and the others. Sure enough, John the Baptist was born to that marriage, a cousin and forerunner of Jesus.

No one knows where and how Luke came to know of these incidents. There are parallels to the Old Testament, like in the Song of Hannah in I Samuel 2. Some have even speculated that Luke found these canticles and inserted them in the Gospel record for emphasis. I prefer to believe in a pet theory that with his careful research, he discovered what had happened at the time of the Savior’s birth. I think he interviewed Elizabeth and Mary and they told him the stories they had been harboring in secret, “pondering them in her heart” in Mary’s case for 30 years. Now that her son Jesus was dead and gone away to heaven, I think she was ready to share her remarkable experiences with someone as interested as Luke.

Anyway, six months after his visit to Zechariah, Gabriel visited a young virgin whose name was Mary, telling her that she would have a child by the Holy Spirit. Imagine

you were there, long ago and faraway in the little Galilean town of Nazareth. In her tiny room, in an ordinary house, likely little more than a mud hut, there was a little girl, or young woman I should say, named Mary. From what we know it was a modest home: no electricity, no indoor plumbing, no privacy, no windows, and no real shelter from the cool of the night. It was dark.

Most likely she was 14 or 15 years old, although we do not know for sure. She had been betrothed to a man named Joseph, normally assumed to be older. A betrothal meant that her parents had arranged a marriage for her, most likely without her consent. Back then, you did not get to date around and fall in love and communicate on Face-book and choose your own spouse. The waiting period lasted for a whole year, during which the bride-to-be continued to live in her parents' home: no time to be alone, to get to know each other, no time to plan a future, even to hold hands or even cop a little kiss on parting.

On this particular night she was awakened from her sleep when the Angel Gabriel called out: "Hail O favored one, the Lord is with you." Oh dear. Naturally, she wakened with a start; the Bible says that she was greatly troubled, just as you would be if an angel entered your bedroom in the middle of the night. She was scared to death. Every time the supernatural intrudes into our everyday lives, it scares us. When the heavenly chorus of angels came to the shepherds in the field, they were filled with fear. Gabriel said reassuringly, "Do not be afraid Mary, you have found favor with God." Fear not, my little one, you have found favor with God. What more could you want?

And what was the favor? Well read on, as if you did not know. The angel said, "Behold you will conceive and you will bear a son, and you shall call his name 'Jesus'." He told her that she was going to have a baby. "How can that be?" she

asked, just in that stage of trying to figure out how babies came into the world, "It's impossible!" she said, "I have never been with a man." Gabriel replied (verse 37), "Never forget Mary that with God nothing is impossible. "But, how can I have a baby if I have not slept with a man?" "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. The baby will be a gift of the One Eternal God." Mary was not ready, no wonder. It says "She pondered these things in her heart."

To find some peace, she went down to visit her older cousin, Elizabeth near Jerusalem. Sadly, the Bible does not mention Mary's mother or whether she even knew at this point. The angel Gabriel had told Mary that Elizabeth was in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Auntie was so startled and so ashamed to be pregnant at her age that she hid herself. When Mary approached her, Elizabeth knew how special it was. She greeted her with familiar words, "Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus." Even Elizabeth's baby caught the news, for it says pre-natal John leapt in her womb, presumably acknowledging that the pre-natal Jesus was his Lord. With that, Mary realized that she was not going crazy, and she was about to become the mother of the long awaited Messiah.

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What the Bible does not say is that at the time Luke was compiling his Gospel record of Jesus, there was still a lingering dispute among believers concerning the role of John the Baptist. He is the forerunner of Jesus in the New Testament, but it was not always that way. At the time, there were those who believed that John was the one sent by God. Luke wants you to be sure, as do the other Gospel writers, that Jesus is the One true Messiah, not John the Baptist.

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Anyway, as a response to Elizabeth's acknowledgment of who Mary's child is and will be, Mary spoke the words which are the Canticum we are using today. Let's move closer to "The Magnificat" itself, and see what we can learn to fortify our spirits. What a message! What a song!

Have you ever had the feeling that you were not quite ready for what was about to happen? Milton wrote that there are times when, "Things are in the saddle and they ride mankind." Sometimes the unforeseen events of the day rush onto center stage and take over the whole show. Days when the world is too much; when life seemed to single you out for some special burden? Times when you had to say: "Why, God? Why me?" It happens all the time. And, it happened to little Mary the night the angel Gabriel came to visit her. She was not ready for it.

Life brings its duties and responsibilities. It could be first days of parenthood; or the first weeks you have to learn to live by yourself again. Or the day you fell in love and got so confused and overwhelmed that you couldn't think of anything or anyone else. Or the day they flew you to Korea, Vietnam or Iraq. Or (On this 67th Anniversary of Pearl Harbor) when you got on a troop ship and you did not know where it was going. Or was it the day when your theretofore faithful husband said, "I am leaving, dear?" Or the day your father died? Or when the doctor said, "I'm sorry, I wish it were not so"? Or, when you had everything figured out, and were doing fine, thank you, and your boss came and told you that your job was done. Of course you were not ready.

"Fear not, for you have found favor with God." Those words will stand behind you when all your other skills and strength and resources fly away. They put meaning into all the other things you say and do. They transport you safely through the sorriest journeys you will have to travel before your days on earth are through. They will sing

on key when you lose your place and help you hum your favorite tunes when the cacophony of noises all around would take away your sanity and peace. Those words will remember when everyone and everything else forgets. Just when you begin to fail and falter and level off - along comes little Mary whistling her marvelous song of triumph and you go marching forward once again!

Little lovely Mary, the Bible says was “endued with grace.” That’s nice. Not the routine grace which flies out of the mouths of preachers all across the land. Not the meek and shy grace which tip toes into the room, hoping no one will see it. Not the deep mysterious grace which hides in our worn out theologies. No, the routine day by day, moment by moment grace. The kind that takes the world as it is and transforms it to goodness unheard of and unexpected: real, earthy and touchable. And no matter what happens from that day on, Mary will not forget the echo of those opening words: “Fear not, you have found favor with God.”

Mary, who had the gift of appreciation, by whose grace and loveliness your power to go on is strengthened, like one who seldom wavers and never is afraid to try on new thoughts and things and friends. One who is aware of her own beauty and not afraid of it, but who never relies on it for gain. One who gains strength from others when she needs it, and gives it freely back when others do. The Bible says it all when it whispers, “She was endued with Grace.”, and “she has found favor with God.” Gentle little Mary, but like a deep creek, flowing through the valley.

Her life was not an easy one. She missed her youth entirely when she was chosen to be the Mother of God. Then “great with child,” the Bible says delicately, she had to journey down the 80 mile pathway on the back of a donkey down to Bethlehem, where her child was born in a stable. Then she learned that the lunatic King Herod had sent his thugs throughout the land to slaughter innocent infant sons under two

years of age. She and Joseph were forced to flee to Egypt to protect their little boy. There they lived in poverty and were outcasts in a foreign land. When Herod died they came back home again, and up they went to Nazareth, to start their life all over. Then before too long, her husband died and she was left to rear the children on her own. And that son named Jesus was a handful. He kept doing his own thing, marching to the beat of another drummer. Finally he went rambling off claiming that he was the perfect Messiah of the world. His brothers thought he was crazy. The authorities tried time and again to kill him; and they finally succeeded on Calvary. There Mary had to crouch on the hilltop and watch her son die. It was not an easy life for Mary. Do you wonder how she did it, how she managed to survive when life kept crashing in on her?

I don't know for sure; the Bible promises that God will give us strength in proportion to our need. In Mary's case I think I can nail it down. All along the way she kept singing songs to praise the Lord. I think she returned time and time again to Gabriel's opening words: "Fear not Mary, you have found favor with God." And then I hear the echo of this magnificent Cantic, The Magnificat rising above the tragic burdens of her life:

"My soul doth magnify the Lord.  
And my spirit does rejoice in God my savior!  
He has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden,  
And he has done great things for me.  
His mercy is on those who fear him.  
He has remembered us in his estate.  
He has put down the mighty, and  
He has exalted those of low degree  
From henceforth all generations  
Will call me blessed.  
And holy is his name. (Paraphrase of Luke 1:46-55)

He that is mighty has done great things for me, and for you. And he has done mighty things for the whole wide world. The Magnificat is about what God has done for

Mary, but as it borrows on a similar song of Hannah in I Samuel 2: 1-10, its main concern is to show that God has concern for those who are downtrodden and in trouble. He will reach down to help them.

It might surprise you that Raymond Brown, one of the greatest scholars of the New Testament, wrote that the original purpose of "The Magnificat" was not to show that Mary had a special place in God's sight. It is based on an ancient canticle to show how much God loves the poor. "He has regarded my low estate." It says that when the Lord chooses a person for a special favor, He does not tend to choose the self-sufficient, the proud, the rich, or the strong. The poor of Yahweh, Dr. Brown says, are those who are not necessarily poor in wealth; they know they are in need, like, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit." They are in tune and waiting for God's love and blessing, however much or little they have.

Notice that the first response of Mary's praise is: "He has had regard for the lowliness of his handmaid." People from poor families in those days were in a pseudo caste system. Slavery was universally practiced. They knew their place. Humble servants did not become the Queen of Heaven; nor could the son of a peasant man from Galilee become the King of all the world. All generations will call her blessed, mainly because she was the mother of the Savior, but also because God lifted her up from her lowly estate and in her Son, who came to bring the abundant life to all.

Christ has given the gifts of life and love, and memory. Kierkegaard once noted that "If you have memory or hope, you should not be unhappy." Safely in the arms of Christ you have everything you need. Back then Augustus Caesar, out in Rome, had the power to make things happen. He forced Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem because he wanted more tax revenue from the people of the land. Ruthless Herod was the reigning king of the local region. People died in an instant when Herod

didn't like them. Herod once predicted that when he died he would rule from heaven. That's a laugh. Were it not for the story of Jesus no one would even know his name.

So, get up and go my friends. Fear not, in Christ you have found favor with God. You do not need to be afraid. Not if you can whisper to yourself that you have found favor with God. If you haven't, or more correctly, if you cannot feel it just now, or if you have not heard about it, this is your moment. This very moment, right now. Pause before you go and make the connection with the Savior. Practice up your tune a little, and join the Chorus as you sing Mary's sweet and lovely Song, The Magnificat: "Come, magnify the Lord with me. He that is mighty has done great things for me. And Holy is his name." I do not ever need to fear again, for I have found favor with God, for now and forever more. Amen

