

“Bringing God”

Luke 1.39-55 (The Magnificat)

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I want to read you part of an ancient text, and ask you who I’m talking about: “Whereas Providence...has...adorned our lives with the highest good:...and has in her beneficence granted us and those who will come after us [a Savior] who has made war to cease and who shall put everything in [peaceful] order...with the result that the birthday of our God signaled the beginning of Good News for the world, because of him.”¹ Any guesses? Here are a couple of hints: his titles include son of God, his mother was a virgin, and he was born in the first century. No, it wasn’t Jesus; it was the first emperor of the Roman Empire: Augustus, who, after his death, was elevated to the status of a god.

But, we have no record of his mother singing a magnificent song of praise to God while she was bringing him into the world.



I’m right in the middle of a real page-turner, *The DaVinci Code*, which was lent to me by a member of the congregation. It’s chock-full of wonderfully provocative ideas, like Jesus was a fully human prophet who was not only married to Mary of Magdala, but also had children with her. So, this is kind of a neat concept: that there are all kinds of people running around – maybe even some of us here at Plymouth – with a bit of Jesus’ DNA in us. Personally, I like that idea, but the book portrays the institutional church as being horrified by the notion. The author asserts that Christianity would cease to exist if we acknowledged the full humanity of Jesus.

That supposition is about 180 degrees off course. The orthodox viewpoint of the church since the fourth century has been that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. Yet, we in the church have often pumped up the divinity half of the equation and stripped away Jesus’ humanity. Jesus was born, probably in much the same way that you and I were. He probably got colds and the flu, just like you and I do. He probably had days when he was a teenager who really ticked his parents off, like you and I did (or do!). He probably had sexual feelings, much the way you and I do. And he might have been married, but I frankly doubt that he was: there just is not enough historical evidence to suggest this. But what if he was? Does that make him less praiseworthy? (Only if you value celibacy highly.) And Jesus died a terribly torturous death, which none of us will likely have to endure.

Would Jesus still be worthy of worship if he was fully human? Of course! So often, I have heard that Easter is the most important holiday in the Christian calendar, because it is about the resurrection. But what about Christmas?

If you take a fairly traditional viewpoint about the incarnation – God coming into human form – isn’t *that* a pretty big deal? And if you take a more humanistic viewpoint – that Jesus was a person with an amazingly close relationship to God and was the source of amazing wisdom and was the messiah – isn’t Christmas pretty significant?

I think part of the reason that lots of us Christians overemphasize Easter and the idea of Christ’s divinity is that it lets us off the hook: “Jesus was God, so don’t expect me to do what he did.” But if we take seriously the idea that Jesus was born, lived, and died, he now is in *our* realm of possibility: he did the things we do, and we, conversely, can aspire to live the way he did. It’s a tall order, but it’s not impossible.

¹ A decree of calendrical change on marble stelae in Asian temples dedicated to Augustus, quoted in John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 1.

The idea that God might come into the world in human form with a body is entirely outside of Jewish theology, but as I remarked earlier, it's not so strange in Greco-Roman philosophy. Yet in the Hellenistic world, there was a deep division between the flesh and the spirit. That dualism (flesh bad, spirit good) is still with us today in our culture, and it has **not one thing** to do with Jesus or with Judaism. (Paul, a Hellenized Jew raised in what is now Turkey, conveyed some of it to us. Thanks, Paul!)

So, here is something critical that Christmas acknowledges: *that bodies are important*. Jesus **had** a body. Now, before you say, "Well, duh!" this very point was the topic of great debate in the early church. The idea that perhaps Jesus' body was a phantasm or comprised only of "spiritual matter" was so popular among some Christians in the third century that it was branded a heresy at the Council of Nicea and given a name: Docetism. The Council of Nicea came up with the concept that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine: that he and God the creator were "of one substance:"² that they had common DNA, to use our way of talking about it. But, don't you think that Jesus had some of Mary's DNA, too?

I would imagine that while not every person in this sanctuary would acknowledge the full divinity of Jesus, all of us would affirm his full humanity. (*Are there any Docetists among us??*) And given that this church holds as one of its stated covenants that members shall have the undisturbed right interpret scripture "according to the dictates of their own conscience, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."³ So, we have ample opportunity to examine our faith and our sacred texts in ways that both challenge and affirm us.

One of the ways I'm suggesting to our confirmation class that we look at scripture is to ask themselves three questions: 1) What does the text say? What words are on the page? 2) What did the text mean to the people who wrote it thousands of years ago? and 3) What does it mean to us today. The shorthand for this paradigm is SAYS – MEANT – MEANS.

So, if we look at today's text, the Magnificat, we can see what it says. It's a song or a poem in which a woman is declaring that her soul magnifies God. (That's what *magnificat* means in Latin: magnifies.) She sings about God and all that God has done for her and her people.

What did it mean to the person for the intended audience? Well, it reflects another ancient poem, the Song of Hannah⁴ praising God for all God has done and for the birth of her son, Samuel. So, it's meant to have resonances with the Hebrew Bible.

It's also a song written during a period of military occupation by the Roman Empire (the so-called *Pax Romanum*, which was anything but peaceful in Mary's homeland). When Mary recalls that is the mighty one, and that God has done great things, has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, and that the powerful will be brought down from their thrones, and the rich sent away empty, her people might have heard it this way: "It's God (not Caesar) who is the mighty one; those damned Romans and the corrupt Herodian aristocracy are going to get their comeuppance; and Caesar isn't going to rule us forever." It's a song of justice and of the ultimate triumph of the people of Mary, who are living under severe oppression.

That takes care of SAYS and MEANT, so what does it mean to us today? We all have different ears with which we hear the stories of our faith. I have the perspective of an affluent, white, man living in North America at the outset of the 21st century. And my

² *homoousias* is the Greek term used at Nicea.

³ Plymouth Constitution, Article IV.

⁴ 1 Samuel 2.1–10

read on this story is going to be different than a displaced woman trying to eke out a living in a squatters' camp in Colombia or a young man in secretly worshipping in an underground church in China or a woman living with HIV in South Africa. We all come to the text with our own lenses of life experience and background. That doesn't invalidate my viewpoint, but it forces me to acknowledge that there are others than mine, and that when we ask what the text might mean to us, we will get multiple answers. There is not one, single correct answer to the question, "What does it mean?"

So, from my perspective, this text means that women are important, that bodies are important, that God's variety of justice (not Saddam's, not Osama bin Laden's, not even our own) is the only ultimate form of justice, and we need to try and live out God's variety of justice here and now.



It's interesting that the author of Luke's gospel, the only biblical author thought to be a Gentile, would first of all affirm the importance of men's and women's bodies, and then place so much emphasis on women. Have you noticed how many good lines the women get in Luke's story about Jesus? Mary and Elizabeth are two of the central characters in the first chapters. More often than not, the women are named (unlike the seemingly nameless Jephtha's daughter or the woman at the well in John's gospel). Jesus affirms the personhood of women and Luke's gospel conveys that more clearly than any other.

According to Luke, Jesus went about "proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women...: Mary, called Magdalene... and Joanna ... and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources."⁵

You've probably heard of the famous theological tract of the 15th century by Thomas á Kempis, *Imitatio Christi*, or the Imitation of Christ. While living a life in imitation of Christ is all well and good, I think that we can also live lives in *imitatio Maria*, or in the example of Mary.

It was she who sings the song of justice and praise, it was she who likely imparted to Jesus a deep sense of compassion, and it is she who continues to inspire millions of Christians – from the veneration of the virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico to the gorgeous Eastern Orthodox icons of the *theotokos*, the bringer of God into the world.

During this final Sunday of Advent, I would ask that you consider using Mary's example of opening yourself up to God, to let God work in you in whatever way is possible, and to truly consider how you can be a bringer of God into the world.

May the spirit of Mary, faithful woman of the promise, be in your heart as we approach the celebration of Christ's birth. And may you, like Mary, find ways to carry God's light to all whose lives you touch.

Amen.

⁵ Luke 8.1–3