Mary’s Joy

First in the 2017 Advent/Christmas series titled “Christmas Discoveries.”

# Scripture: Luke 1:46-56

# Key thought: With joy, Mary foretells the blessing to future generations of humble people of faith.

# Intro:

Sometimes this passage is called the Canticle of Mary or more commonly, the Magnificat. Magnificat is the first word of the Latin Vulgate text of this section. It is the Latin verb meaning to magnify. Besides “magnifies the Lord” (NRSV), the phrase has been translated in English as “glorifies the Lord” NIV, “praises the Lord’s greatness” (God’s Word Translation), and “proclaims the greatness of the Lord” (HCSB). This hymn forms a part of the Daily Office in the Roman Catholic Vespers service. It has been set to music by some of the world’s greatest composers including Palestrina, Bach and Mozart. (<http://www.ourcatholicprayers.com/magnificat.html>) If this passage is neglected by Protestants, it should not be for it is a rich and inspiring section of Scripture.

## Mary’s prayer is rich in Scriptural background.

First it has many parallels to Hannah’s prayer in 1 Sam. 2:1-10.
It seems to be modeled after this prayer. (see chart in Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible p. 1741)

### There are many more Scripture parallels

A classic commentator named Plummer found 12 more OT Scriptures that were alluded to in the passage. Some of the more important of these are noted in the study notes of many of our Bibles.

For a few examples:

1. The Psalmist had also written about how God noticed the humble people.

Though the Lord is exalted, he looks kindly on the lowly; though lofty, he sees them from afar. Ps 138:6

For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. Luke 1:48

1. For the use of the title for God, “The Mighty One” compare Zephaniah 3:17 with Mary’s words.

The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save;
 he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love;
Zeph. 3:17 ESV

For the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.
Luke 1:49 NIV

1. The Psalmist had written about how God helps the hungry as Mary also noted.

He satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things. Ps 107:9 NRSV

He has filled the hungry with good things. Luke 1:53 NIV

This wealth of Scriptural allusions tells us something wonderful about Mary. Certainly she was young. But despite that, she was apparently quite knowledgeable of God’s Word. Even considering that this is an inspired utterance; nevertheless, the usual way that God’s Spirit works is to use the knowledge that is present in the prophet. So it is safe to conclude that Mary was familiar with the OT, judging from the evidence in this beautiful passage.

But what is the purpose of this beautiful passage?

## The keynote of this passage is Joy!

Elizabeth greets Mary with blessing (v. 42). The baby in the womb of Elizabeth leaps “for joy” (v. 44). Mary opens her hymn of praise with a verb translated as rejoice which means literally to jump for joy (v. 47). What follows is a list of reasons for joy. So what are some of the key reasons for Mary’s rejoicing?

# The Joy of Blessing extended

## Joy for personal blessing - all will call me blessed

Mary begins by celebrating the goods news that has come to her. Now this is an easy perspective for us to see, looking back and knowing who Jesus became and what he has done for us. But was it such an easy perspective for Mary to see at this moment in her life? I don’t think so. To be found with child while engaged would at the very least result in the breaking of the engagement, even today. But in those days, it could result in the woman’s death. If the aggrieved engaged man did not go for the death penalty, think of the potential for public shame that would be involved anyway. No, it was not easy for Mary to see past all this trouble and come to the conclusion that she was blessed beyond all women to have the privilege of bearing the Messiah. But she grasped the joy and she praised God.

Often we need to be able to look beyond our time of trouble and with God’s help grasp onto joy. Joy, the fruit of the Spirit in us, is God’s gift when we keep our eyes on God’s promises and possibilities.

The perspective Mary voiced had already been proclaimed by Elizabeth in her greeting.

In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! Luke 1:42 NIV

The same viewpoint would be recorded again in the NT coming from an anonymous woman in the crowd who after listening to Jesus’ teaching, speaks up for all of us;

As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.” Luke 11:27 NIV

## Joy for mercy extended to us (generation to generation of those who fear him)

But Mary’s joy does not stop with herself. In this almost ecstatic moment, by the Holy Spirit’s help, she sees with a clear prophetic eye that through the one in her womb, God would bring blessing to those who love God in future generations as well.

His [the Mighty One’s] mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. Luke 1:50

This extension of blessing echoes the sentiments of Psalm 103.

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, Ps 103:17 ESV

## We can catch the joy

So we too are amazingly blessed through what is happening in the Christmas story. And here, even before the actual Christmas night, we can already begin to appropriate the joy of Christmas for it is ours as well. It does not belong just to Mary and Joseph, it is not just for the shepherds and the wisemen, it is specifically Good News of great joy for all who fear God, as Mary says. That’s us!

So this Christmas, despite the busyness, despite the bad news that constantly assaults us from contemporary news sources, there is reason for joy in Jesus. As St. Ambrose once said in referring to this wonderful prayer of Mary, "Let Mary's soul be in us to glorify the Lord; let her spirit be in us that we may rejoice in God our Savior."

As Jesus would later say,

In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” John 16:33 NIV

Or as Paul put it,

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. Phil 4:4-6

# A surprising prediction – Joy for the humble

One note in Mary’s inspired message that surprises us is the extended contrast between the poor and the rich. It had been revealed to her by the Spirit that in choosing her as the mother of Jesus and through what Jesus would do, God would bring joy to those who were humble in heart and feared God, not to those who were proud in their hearts even though they might also be rich and powerful.

##  This world's victors are brought down

So before we even know the story of Jesus’ birth as it unfolds in Luke 2 and in Matthew 2, we are given a huge hint about what the plot will be. The poor will play an honored part. The rich and proud will be embarrassed. Before Jesus is even born, we can guess which type of people will be more comfortable with him in his adult ministry years. Mary tells us. It will be the humble people.

God has “scattered those who are proud” (v. 51). Rulers are predicted to be “brought down…from their thrones (v. 52). The rich are “sent…away empty” (v. 53).

## This worlds' humble are lifted up

In contrast to the fortunes of the proud, the humble are lifted up. The Greek word means those of low degree in society. This is especially fitting for Mary herself (v. 48) but it also consummately fits the shepherds and later it would fit most of the people who would come to hear Jesus. As the Gospel reports, “the common people heard him gladly” (Mark 12:37 KJV).

The Greek text of both James and First Peter use this same Greek word here translated as “humble” to teach us the same contrast.

But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." James 4:6 NRSV (see also 1 Peter 5:5)

In Mary’s Song, the category of “humble” includes herself (v. 48) and then also the “the hungry” (v. 53) who will be filled with good things.

## Joy for us too.

The application for us is obvious. But in case we missed it, Peter spells it out.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. 1 Peter 5:6

When we submit to god, we receive of his joy as well. Joy is the second of the fruits of the Spirit in our lives.

# Joy because God is fulfilling His promises to Abraham

Finally, Mary was very conscious that in sending Jesus, God was fulfilling his covenant promises made to Abraham (vv. 54, 55). This was also a reason for great joy. The waiting for the promises of the covenant was over. God was bringing them to fulfillment.

This connection with Abraham and God keeping his promises is also important for at least two more big reasons. First, it is important to see that what God was doing at Christmas was not an isolated visit from an otherwise detached deity. No, this event was happening in continuity with the promises made to Abraham and to David as well. It was the fulfillment of prophecies made by Moses and Isaiah and Micah and David and Jeremiah. This was God’s next chapter in salvation history, in the unfolding story of his relationship with humankind. God’s work was moving forward. This awareness is a cause for joy too. It is another encouragement that god is always at work as Jesus later taught us!

Second, it was important to be conscious that God was fulfilling his promises because it is a witness to the faithfulness of God. He keeps his promises! He is a covenant-keeper. In this, God contrasts sharply with us humans. We are not good covenant keepers. That is one more reason we need to follow Jesus, so we learn to be covenant-keepers as God is.

So Mary makes a point to remind us that in what is happening at Christmas time, God is keeping his age-old promises to Israel. We can rejoice in this too.