

He Has Filled the Hungry with Good Things

Luke 1:39-56

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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On the third Sunday of Advent, our theme is joy. And our text is Mary's famous song. The Magnificat.

My spirit rejoices in God my Savior...

This is a song that has resounded through the ages. It is sung and prayed by Christians around the world throughout the year, celebrating the world-changing truth that God has been, that God *is* mindful of those on the bottom.

Its themes are familiar:

- The holiness, mercy, and strength of God
- The upside-down nature of God's vision for the world
 - o The scattering of the proud;
 - o The dethroning of the powerful and arrogant;
 - o The raising up of the lowly;
 - o The filling of the hungry with "good things."

Mary's song echoes another song—the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, at the birth of another unlikely son, the prophet Samuel.

Then Hannah prayed and said:

"My heart rejoices in the LORD...

⁴ "The bows of the warriors are broken,
but those who stumbled are armed with strength.

⁵ Those who were full hire themselves out for food,
but those who were hungry are hungry no more...

⁸ He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes
and has them inherit a throne of honor.

Joy is a natural and exuberant response to the faithfulness of God in keeping his promise to his people.

Well, we hear Mary's song at Christmas time, and we sigh, and we smile. It sure sounds good.

The poor and lowly being lifted up, the proud and powerful being scattered and brought down, the hungry being filled with good things and the rich being sent away empty.

Who wouldn't celebrate this upending of the status quo?

Well, the rich, probably. Those who have never known hunger. Those more acquainted with power, status, influence. Those who Mary's song says will be "scattered, "brought down," and "sent away empty."

The rich and the powerful have always known this song is more than a bit of pleasant biblical poetry to usher us into the Christmas season. This is dangerous stuff.

King Herod knew it, with his desperate attempt to get rid of Jesus before he could even take his first steps. Three decades or so later, the Jewish leaders and Roman occupiers would also know it as they sent him to his death.

But even much later, the hope of this song has often been deemed threatening to public order. According to one commentator,

Mary's song is so subversive in its cultural, socioeconomic and political implications, it has been banned many times in modern history. When the British ruled India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being sung in churches. Similarly,

during the "Dirty War" in Argentina, after the mothers of disappeared children posterized the capital plaza with the words of the Magnificat, the military... banned all public displays of the song. Too much hope, they decided, is a dangerous thing.¹

Quite a sentence, that last one. *Too much hope is a dangerous thing.*

So, it has long been recognized that Mary's song has deep social implications—at least by those in social locations that are different than ours.

The rich and the powerful *did* not and *do* not love Mary's song. The status quo suits them just fine.

But even those of us who are not rich or powerful should probably squirm a bit more than we do. We have the luxury of hearing the Magnificat as a theological abstraction, a future hope.

But I wonder how this song sounds on the reserve. Or in immigrant communities huddled in the ghettos of our big cities. Or for the working poor left behind in economic downturns. Or those struggling along on meagre pensions or disability insurance.

How does it sound to the hungry in need of being filled with good things?

On Tuesday morning, I got a nice surprise. Two women from Safe Families Lethbridge showed up at my office door with a Starbucks coffee and some promotional materials for their Christmas fundraising campaign (see bulletin).

Because of the postal strike, they were going around to churches to personally deliver what they would ordinarily send out in the mail. We had a lovely little visit.

After they left, I read through their newsletter. There were some sobering statistics that laid out the need in our city. Among those I found most alarming was that one out of five kids in Lethbridge live in poverty, the highest rate in Alberta, and that Lethbridge police receive an average of 1800 domestic abuse calls a year with 30% of these having young children present during the altercation!

Amid these sad statistics was a story written by a child.

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2034>

I don't know how old this child is. I don't know anything about their race or their history, whether they are a boy or a girl.

I want to read it for you:

Before I met Safe Families, I had to get myself out the door to school on my own. I was often late because I had to walk several blocks no matter the weather. I didn't usually eat breakfast or have a packed lunch because there often wasn't food at my house. School was my highlight because it was my safe place, and I could just be a kid there.

When I was at home, my mom was often sleeping or angry with me and my little sister. I tried my best to entertain my sister and make sure she got food to eat when she was hungry. Sometimes I would use my mom's phone to order food from Tim Hortons. My mom would sometimes yell, and sometimes when she was really mad, she would hit us...

Night times were always scary for me. Before my dad moved out of our house, there was a lot of screaming and hitting and other things I don't like to talk about. It was hard for me to feel safe at bedtime...

Then, my mom met Safe Families. [The staff members] would stop by and bring us food. My sister started pre-school; I felt glad because I knew she would be safe during the day when we were away from each other. They brought my mom some friends that really helped her. They even drove me to and from school every day when I saw some unsafe people from my family at school. Some days my mom was doing really good and other days it seemed like she wasn't okay.

When couldn't wake my mom up, we would call Safe Families and they would come pick us up so we could stay with one of their Safe Families. I really liked this because we could play with their kids and they made us delicious food—like lasagna!

Then everything got really bad. My mom had to go to the hospital late at night and my sister and I went to stay with the Safe Family for a week. I felt scared. I knew my mom was not okay. I was not okay either. I felt anxious. I didn't know what was going

to happen to my mom. I really missed my mom a lot. I tried to be brave for my little sister and help her fall asleep at night...

While we were with my Safe Family I didn't have to worry about food or looking after my little sister. They read us books before we went to sleep at night and would say prayers and talk through all of my worries with me. At first, I kept sleeping with the lights on, but I slowly learned that I could sleep with a night light and still feel safe.

My Safe Families mom would help me with my homework and she even went on a field trip with me. [Staff members] would come and pick us up on weekends so that we could go to see my mom in the hospital. I was very excited to see my mom, I could that she was starting to feel better, and that the hospital people were helping her a lot...

I don't know where my sister and I would be today if it wasn't for Safe Families. When I grow up I want to work with Safe Families so I can help other families just like mine.

Probably for the first time in my life, I got to the end of a fundraising appeal with tears in my eyes.

Maybe it's because I see the products of broken families every Monday in the jail. Maybe it's because I see so many adults treating relationships as disposable, prioritizing themselves over the needs of precious lives they have brought into the world. Maybe it's because of the crisis of addiction and despair that looms over so many parts of the Western world and that lurks in and behind the words of the child who wrote that letter.

But mostly, my heart just broke for these poor kids and what they have already had to endure in their short lives.

After I read this fundraising letter, I went back to Luke 1 and read it again.

He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

I read Hannah's song:

He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes
and has them inherit a throne of honor.

I thought about those two kids ordering Tim Hortons on their mom's phone. Of being excited about lasagna.

Did you notice that Mary's song gets the timing all wrong. It's written in the present tense. The Lord *has done* these things.

But Jesus hasn't done anything yet. He hasn't preached or baptized or performed any miracles. He hasn't overthrown any rulers or multiplied any loaves or fish. There are still plenty of poor people who are exploited by the rich! The oppressive Roman Empire marches on.

Jesus hasn't fixed anything! He certainly hasn't died or risen from the dead or ascended into heaven! He hasn't even been *born*!

Yet somehow Mary knows that her child will change things. She knows—somehow—that the baby in her womb marks the turning point of God's story.

Her song is an expression of faith and trust.

Two thousand or so years later, there are obviously still hungry people in desperate need of being filled with good things and needy who need to be raised from the ash heap.

It can be easy to think, "Well, that's a nice song, but it's not true. Jesus hasn't done what the song says! The rich still exploit the poor. The powerful still trample the powerless. The proud still get more airtime than the humble."

Children still endure situations like the one described in the letter.

But there is a profound sense in which Jesus' coming *has done*—or at least begun—the promises of Mary's song.

After all, what is an organization like Safe Families if not an expression of the hands and feet of Jesus Christ? A concrete example of the priorities of Jesus? A foretaste of the great reversal that his coming inaugurated?

A filling of the hungry with good things.

(I hope a few of you will take those piggy banks home this Christmas and fill them up with twoonies and loonies and dollar bills and bring them back to Safe Families in early January! If we run out, I can get more ☺).

We could say the same of so many other organizations in our city, our country, our world, that are doing their best to feed the hungry, to minister to the sick or the imprisoned, to provide opportunities for the poor to get a hand up (MCC, the Canadian Foodgrains Bank).

Each one of these is guided by the conviction that the world Mary sings of is as real as the world it threatens.

The church itself—our church and the broad church—is an expression of this. The church is guided by and defined by the hope that Mary’s song describes God’s priorities, God’s vision for the world, God’s promise.

Whether it is the church Jesus instituted or the countless para-church organizations out there in the world daily labouring to make Jesus’ upside-down priorities a reality, sometimes in terrible circumstances, ***none of it would exist, if not for the subject of Mary’s song.***

We are the inheritors of a world that has been shaped, however imperfectly, however incompletely, by a conviction that Jesus’ priorities are the ones that finally matter.

In this sense, God *has* done the things Mary sings of. And he will continue to do them, through us, until Jesus comes again.

I want to end with the first words out of Mary’s mouth: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Can we risk joy in a world where so much still seems so unfinished, unjust, where so much that is wrong has yet to be made right?

A world where hungry children order Tim Hortons on their absent mother's phone?

I think we can, and we must. Joy, like hope, like peace, and like love (next week's theme) is an expression of trust.

Trust in the God who can and who will do more than we can ask or imagine, the God who will bind up every wound, make all that is wrong, right.

Joy is a duty of faith. It is an expression of confidence in the future God is bringing, a future which is already invading the present.

I want to close with the words of Debie Thomas. I quoted her earlier in a discussion of how *The Magnificat* has been banned by those who decided that "too much hope was a dangerous thing." She goes on to say this:

But "too much hope" is precisely what we're called to cultivate and proclaim... in Advent. The Messiah is almost here, Mary tells us, and the promise of his lasting reign changes everything. There is no unjust system, oppressive hierarchy, or arrogant leadership structure that God will not upend. No promise God will fail to keep. No broken, exploited life God will not save.²

My prayer is that we will have "too much hope" in our hearts.

Too much to be reasonable. Too much to be plausible. Too much to passively sit by and be content with the status quo. Certainly too much for us to accomplish on our own.

Too much hope for anyone but the God who comes to us, born a child in a manger.

May our souls truly magnify the Lord, making his priorities ours. And may our spirits rejoice in God our Saviour, whose coming is at hand.

Amen.



² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2034>