

Love

Dec 18, 2022

Montavilla United Methodist Church

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Luke: 1:46-55 CEB

46 Mary said, "With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

47 In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.

48 He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.

Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored

49 because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name.

50 He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next,

who honors him as God.

51 He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

52 He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.

54 He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy,

55 just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

Most of our favorite Christmas pageant scenes come from Luke's gospel.

The angel Gabriel appearing to Mary - angel costumes are so easy to put together in a hectic holiday season - a white robe, a tinsel halo, maybe some wings and, Bob's your Christmas uncle!

Shepherds in bathrobes and an endless number of baaing sheep can be quickly manufactured with a roll of polyester craft batting wrapped around their middles.

A choir of little angels taught to pronounce the latin as "in-egg-shell-zees-day-oh"

The innkeeper, who doesn't actually appear in the gospel of Luke, and yet is implied by the offer to take shelter with the animals.

The gospel of Luke as presented in so many Christmas pageants seems safe and traditional, and non-controversial.

Except the author of Luke and Acts, was anything but, traditional and non-controversial.

The author of Luke, practically shouts his interpretive approach to the ministry of Jesus in chapter 4, by choosing to share the reading that Jesus chose in his home synagogue in Nazareth as Jesus' first recorded teaching. Here it is in Luke 4:16-20

16 Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. 17 The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

18 The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed,
19 and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.[a]
20 He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down.

Mic drop!

Luke's Jesus, is a Jesus with attitude!

In quoting this passage from Isaiah Jesus is talking about transforming "the way things are" into "the way things ought to be."

Good news to the poor...

Release of prisoners...

Sight for the blind...

Liberation for the oppressed...

Are all pretty significant changes to the way the world usually works.

But, the Year of the Lord's favor is the most subversive proclamation of them all.

The year of the Lord's favor is a reference to the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus chapter 25. I'm not going to quote it here because it's a loooong chapter with many very detailed rules, but the gist of the Year of Jubilee is that once every 50 years all debts will be canceled and all ancestral land will be returned. The Jubilee basically served as a once per generation economic reset button. A way of putting a stop to multi-generational poverty and multi-generational hoarding of wealth.

Luke's Jesus comes out swinging! Giving notice to the rich, the unjust justice system, the failure of the religious authorities to advocate for the marginalized....

And the Year of the Lord's Favor gives notice to the Roman Empire that it's time for them to return the ancestral lands of Judea to the 12 tribes of Israel.

Jesus was getting a little political!

He kinda gets that from his mom.

Our Bible reading today is from Mary's song. We're continuing our story from last week, where Mary is visiting her cousin Elizabeth and starts spouting poetry, "blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus!"

Today's reading is Mary's poetry slam response, which is traditionally called the Magnificat, because in the Latin translation the poem begins with:

Magnificat is the Lord! -Or- **Magnificent is the Lord! (46-47)**

Mary goes on to say:

I was a nobody and now everybody will call me blessed, because of God! (48-49)

God's mercy is for everyone! (50)

The proud are going down! (51)

The powerful will lose and the powerless be lifted. (52)

The hungry will be full and the rich will be empty. (53)

God remembers the covenant with Abraham, so Rome better look out! (54-55)

Mary was getting a little political too.

But this is a sermon about love.

Love, the kind of love that Jesus talked about and practiced is a verb.

Love is an action, not an amorphous bit of heartburn in your chest.

Biblical love is the practice of working to improve the wellbeing of the loved.

Biblical love isn't "the tingles" or "all the feels," Biblical love is the practice of working to improve the wellbeing of the loved.

Mary's song - the Magnificat is a manifesto of love.

Mary is proclaiming that God really loves us.

God really, love as a verb, loves us.

As in, God has mercy for everyone, especially those who are suffering.

And this is a challenging message in a lot of ways.

1. First of all, is God's mercy really for everyone? Because with all this talk of the proud, the powerful and the rich being on the losing end of God's great reversal, one begins to wonder if God really does love everybody or just the poor and marginalized? After all Matthew 19:24 reads, "it's easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's kingdom." In comparison to our houseless neighbors, I'm rich, so does that mean that God doesn't love me?
 - a. The short answer is that yes, I do believe that God loves everyone, no exceptions. To say that God does not love the rich is to take these couple of verses badly out of context. The larger context of Jesus' teachings on money is that it's not about how much money you have, it's about how you make it and what you do with it. Those of us with resources should always be asking ourselves:
 - i. Does the way we make money do harm to others?, and
 - ii. Does the way I use money do as much good as I can?
 - iii. As John Wesley, the founder of Methodism taught in his sermon On The Use of Money.
 - b. What if we were to understand Mary's manifesto of love as the proud learning to be humble, the powerful giving up some of their privilege to empower others, and the rich going away empty because they have set a feast before the hungry and have asked for nothing in return?
 - i. Did you know that many rich people suffer from depression? Happiness research has demonstrated that for those without enough, increasing their income to a sustainable level improves wellbeing. For those with more than enough, helping others improves their wellbeing. Science has confirmed it. Loving one another makes everyone's lives better.
2. The other main problem with this passage is that it's pretty obvious that God does not fix all the things. The poor are still with us, the hungry are not all fed, there are still unreleased prisoners (and sometimes that's a good thing), there are plenty of people still living with disabilities and chronic health conditions that affect their quality of life, and oppression continues unchecked in so many places! Is the Christmas Proclamation of, "peace on earth and goodwill to all," an empty promise? If God really loves us, why hasn't God fixed all the things? Isn't 2000 years enough time to get the job done?

- a. The question of why suffering exists if God loves us, is a huge branch of theology, so I'm not going to go into all the thoughts various theologians have had. Instead I'm just going to be the Methodist Pastor that I am and say there are many good theological answers to this question and none of them fully answer the question. But, here's the practical theology that works for me.
- b. As a Methodist, I believe in free will, not predestination. That means that God gave us the ability to make choices and experience the consequences of those choices. Our choices affect more than just ourselves. To ask why God allows suffering to happen, is in many ways to project the blame for the consequences of our own actions upon God. For example, God does not cause people to be houseless, human economic policies do. So the hungry are fed and the oppressed are liberated when God's people fulfill our baptismal vows, "to resist evil, injustice and oppression in all their forms," (UMH p35). Essentially, God changes us and we change the world.
- c. Free will, of course, does not explain earthquakes and cancer and all the suffering that we don't think is caused by humans. As I said before, there is no perfect or complete theological answer to the question, If God loves us then why does suffering happen?

But here's what I do know.

God does love us.

God loves all of us.

No exceptions.

This is why God calls us to the practice of Love.

A love that is good news for the poor.

Love that sets captives free.

Love that calls the rich to empty hands and full hearts by setting a full table for the hungry.

A love that makes people feel seen, and heard, and cared for.

Love that is a verb.