

## The Birth of a Revolutionary

(a sermon for Advent)

Luke 1:(26-38)46-56 (also perhaps Jeremiah 33:14-16)

Note: read Luke 1:26-38, but wait to read Luke 1:46-56

By John Gill

This morning, we are continuing the season of Advent, the period of preparation for the coming of Christ – into our lives, and into our world. It is a time of hope and expectation – a time of promise and a time of joy – a time for each of us to make ready our hearts for the in-breaking of God in Jesus Christ.

This morning, I want us to look at one special person who experienced this time of expectation in a concrete way. No person in the history of the world knew the hope, the promise, and the joy of preparing for the arrival of the Christ-child any more profoundly than his mother, Mary.

The story of Mary's adventure began one night when an angel appeared to her and broke the news that she had been chosen to play a vital part in God's Master Plan of Salvation – that, from among all the women of Israel, she had been favored to be the mother of God's Son! What a remarkable leap of faith on Mary's part, to consent to become "the handmaiden of the Lord..." Mary had been chosen by God to serve Him, and she surrendered to His will for her life.

In looking at Mary's example, we come to see what it means to be "chosen by God," – that God chooses US, as well, not because we deserve to be chosen, but so that we can serve Him. When God calls us, it is because He has a part for US to play in His Master Plan, as well.

In the story of the Annunciation, we hear Mary declare her willingness to be used by God to fulfill His Master Plan for the world. Mary was chosen – and so are you and I.

But the part of the story I want to focus on this morning is the section that follows the story of the Annunciation. In verses 26-38 of the first chapter of Luke, we see that God chose Mary to be part of His Master Plan of Salvation. But, in the remainder of the first chapter, we will begin to get a glimpse of just WHAT this Master Plan of God involves.

Mary has come to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who is herself pregnant with a baby, John (the Baptist). When they meet, John, within the womb, leaps to be near Jesus in Mary's womb. And Mary breaks into joyous song:

*"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich*

*he has sent empty away. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever." (Luke 1:46-56 RSV)*

This great hymn that pours forth from the depths of Mary's soul has traditionally been called "The Magnificat," because the Latin translation of Mary's outburst of joy begins with the word "magnificat." This lovely hymn of Mary has been a favorite of the Church throughout the centuries. It has been set to music by countless composers and has become so familiar to many congregations that their members can quote the hymn word-for-word, just as you and I quote the Lord's Prayer. And just like all familiar texts we know by heart, we often miss the POWER which the words contain.

You see, this "Magnificat" is no innocent passage! Luke did not include it simply because he wanted a pretty embellishment for the story of the birth of the Christ Child. No. This seemingly innocent passage – contains DYNAMITE!

Mary, the teenage girl with the Son of God growing in her womb, is overcome with the Holy Spirit. But, not only does she offer God praise and glory for having been selected by God for the privilege of being the mother of the Messiah, she also describes a vision of the Kingdom of God over which her Son would reign.

Her prophetic words foreshadow the mission of the Son of God – to live-out this vision of the Kingdom, and to teach others to live according to God's Master Plan for the world – a mission her son later declares as he launches his ministry.

In Luke's gospel, we read the story. He has come to his home town synagogue, and asked for the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, and he turns to the passage that reads: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*" (Luke 4:18-19). Just like his mother's song, it was a radical vision of the Kingdom of God which had such controversial implications that the powerful people of Jesus' day would not accept it. Instead, they nailed Christ to a cross.

Yes, this "Magnificat" DOES contain dynamite! In fact, E. Stanley Jones, one of the greatest Christians of the twentieth century, said (and I'm quoting): "The Magnificat is the most revolutionary document in the world."

The Magnificat is SO revolutionary that, when Anglican missionaries were evangelizing the people of India, the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time warned his missionaries NEVER to read the Magnificat in public! You see, it was the British who were the powerful and mighty as the occupiers of India. If missionaries began preaching the Magnificat, it might give the poor of India cause to start a revolt!

William Barclay, who wrote the most successful Bible commentary in the English language, also recognized the explosive power of this text. He suggests that, in the Magnificat, we might be stunned by just HOW revolutionary God's Plan for the world really is.

As I read the words of Mary, I have to conclude that Jesus came into the world to bring about two revolutions, which I'd like for us to consider together this morning, and to ponder throughout this Advent season.

First of all, the Magnificat declares that Christ was sent into the world to lead a PERSONAL REVOLUTION within our lives.

As Mary sang: "He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts."

You see, pride is a terrible stumbling block which prevents us from living according to God's Master Plan. When we think of ourselves more highly than we ought, then we cannot think of others as we should. When Christ comes to us in all his purity and righteousness, we realize just how UN-worthy we really are. Our pride is "scattered," and we stand naked before God.

There is a story written by O'Henry, about a boy who was raised in a small village. In school, he used to sit beside a girl, and they liked each other. He went to the city and fell into evil ways, becoming a pick-pocket and a thief. One day he snatched an old lady's purse, and then gloated to a friend about how skilled he had been in committing the crime. But then he saw, waking down the street, the girl he had loved in school, still as sweet and innocent as ever. The young man was filled with shame. He leaned his head against a street lamp and muttered, "O God, I wish I could die."

You see, when confronted with purity and goodness, his pride was "scattered in the imagination of his heart," and he saw himself for what he was.

When Christ comes to us, and WE see ourselves as WE are, our prideful arrogance is scattered by God, and our hearts are led to repentance. It is only when we surrender ourselves before God that our own PERSONAL revolution can begin. God DOES have a Master Plan for our lives, IF we will only surrender to his will.

The Advent season is a time of self-reflection. So, ask yourself this morning: - "Do I think of myself more highly than I ought? What selfish 'prides' do I need to have scattered? Is there something in my life that is preventing me from truly seeing myself the way I am, and repenting? Am I willing for Christ to break into my life, 'scattering the imagination of my heart,' and unleashing a revolution within me?"

Most of us may feel pretty comfortable hearing that it is part of God's Master Plan that our PERSONAL lives might be revolutionized. That's a message that we've heard over and over again if we have spent any time in church at all!

But Mary says there is another “revolution” Christ will bring when he comes – one that might make us a little bit UN-comfortable. According to this Song of Mary, the second revolution her baby will bring is a SOCIAL REVOLUTION: “He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree. He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent empty away.”

In this new order Christ was to bring to the world, there would be no distinctions of class – all are equal in God’s eyes.

Muretus was a wandering scholar during the Middle Ages. Some of his travels took him to Italy. One day while in Italy, he became ill and was taken to a hospital for the poor. The doctors, thinking that Muretus was a vagrant beggar, stood over his bed and began a conversation among themselves. They spoke in Latin, assuming that their patient couldn’t understand what they were saying. They were discussing the possibility of using him for medical experiments, since he was a worthless beggar, and would never be missed. Imagine their surprise when Muretus looked up and answered them – in Latin – “Call no man worthless for whom Christ died.”

Even a social revolution doesn’t seem too radical when it is illustrated with a story about a medieval scholar half a world away. But what about when it hits closer to home – when it’s brought to bear on OUR lives – Our nation – OUR community? What might the passage “He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree” mean in the context of the United States? Or in this community? Who are the “mighty” Christ came to “put down?” And who are “those of low degree” Christ came to exalt? And what might the proclamation, “He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent empty away” mean for our world where there is an ever-increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor? Whose “thrones” did Christ come to topple?” Who are the ones for whom Christ’s coming offers hope for a better life? And where do you and I fit into this new social order?

To some people, this might sound like fabulous good news. Others of us may not like the idea much. But part of God’s Master Plan, Mary tells us, is for there be a social revolution – a leveling of the playing field – a world where we finally see one another as being truly equal.

Maybe this is what the prophet meant when he said of the coming Messiah: “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plane. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

In the Magnificat, Mary is saying that the Son to whom she was destined to give birth would completely turn the values of the world upside-down. He would establish an entirely new social order where there would no longer be any distinction between male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, but where ALL shall be equal in the eyes of the world, just as they are already equal in the sight of God.

The coming of Jesus will mean a revolution where class distinctions would be no more, where fellowship and love would replace prejudice and hate, and where the wealth of God's world will be evenly divided between ALL of God's children!

You know, I believe E. Stanley Jones was right! This song of Mary is pretty radical stuff! To think that the coming of a tiny Baby, born in an obscure village, could set-off such a revolution is hard to believe – but it happened! The revolution is unleashed into the world. God is working out his Master Plan, through His Son, Jesus Christ – and the Kingdom of God is nearer than ever.

During Advent, we declare that Christ IS coming! But, are we ready to welcome Him, and take seriously all that His Advent will mean? Because, when he comes into our lives, WE will be changed. He will “scatter OUR pride in the imagination of our hearts,” and will call us to repentance. When we finally surrender to His Master Plan, then our LIVES will be revolutionized.

And when Christ comes to our world, IT will be changed. Then, we will be made aware that, in God's sight, we are all equally precious, and that He has blessed us with material resources SO THAT we might be a blessing to others. When our nation's priorities and attitudes are brought into line with God's Master Plan, then our SOCIETY will be revolutionized.

Therefore, during this Advent season, when we pray, asking Christ to come into our lives and into our world, we had better mean it, because we are praying a very revolutionary prayer! We are joining Mary in her song of joy, sharing with her the radical vision of the Kingdom of God.

This Christmas season, let us allow God to revolutionize US, so that WE might be agents of God's revolution in the WORLD! Then the Kingdom of God we pray for every time we pray our Lord's Prayer will finally become a reality “on earth, just as it is in heaven.”

Amen.