

## **Christmas Dawn Meditation 2017, based on Luke 1:46-55**

Christmas story, we start with Luke 2. That's standard for this Christmas Dawn service. In services of lessons and carols, the Luke 2 story is usually set up with some Hebrew Bible texts, which function as a set up for Luke 2. Once the second chapter of Luke starts, the baby arrives rather quickly!

This is, perhaps, because Luke has a previous chapter ("1") that does a whole lot of set up. In fact, those 80 verses of set up are a little bit too well done and few churches choose to include them in the story itself. This is too bad, because they're full of magnificent poetry, intentionally foreshadowing, and theological richness. In both Matthew and Luke, the opening chapter serve as "gospels in miniature"<sup>1</sup>, and set up themes that will be repeated throughout their texts.

Luke's themes include a value of women, a focus on the marginalized, and attention to the Holy Spirit. All of those are found in Mary's song, from Chapter 1. Mary's song is set in her time with her older relative Elizabeth, when both are pregnant. Elizabeth has just exclaimed over Mary, said to be moved by the Spirit who is with John the Baptist - who is in her womb.

The song we read to start worship is said to be Mary's reply. It is based off of Hannah's song in 1 Samuel, with other Hebrew Bible motifs pulled in, but it is a magnificent piece of work that outshines all that comes before it. Mary's song reflects a maturing of the faith of the people (this is 1200 or so years later), as well as a deep sense of rootedness in faith.

Now, "Mary's song" was likely NOT written by Mary, but rather developed by early Christians (ones who converted from Judaism to know those texts so well) and edited by Luke into its current form. Nonetheless, it is attributed to Mary as an imaginative reflection on how it might have felt to be the MOTHER of JESUS. It seems likely that it is also meant to reflect what kind of woman it would take to raise Jesus. This presents her as a brilliant woman with extensive faith and an expansive understanding of God's nature.

To begin with, Mary's song draws a parallel between Mary herself and the rest of God's work. According to Luke, Mary is a young girl (barely capable of being called a woman) from Galilee, engaged to a carpenter. To break that down a bit, those clues tell us that Mary was a Jewish peasant on the cusp of puberty, who lived in a tiny village in a region considered a backwater to the Judeans who were themselves considered to be backwater to those in power in the Rome.

She was, to the world, "lowly" as most impoverished girls and women have been. But to be called upon to be the mother of Jesus raises her up, as God tends to raise up the lowly. She contrasts her current state with how she will be seen in the future "blessed."

This leads her to speak of God's nature: mercy, strength, and an inverting of the ways of the world. The lowly are lifted up, the proud are scattered. The hungry are fed, the rich are sent away without getting even more. The ways of the world are INVERTED.

The end of the song recognizes that through Jesus, promises of God will be fulfilled, ones that go back to the beginning of the story. That is, in this song, Jesus is named as the Messiah who as been expected, AND as a messiah who will change all of the ways that things are done. While the ancients had expected a powerful king with military might, Mary speaks of a servant of God who will transform power itself.

That is, Luke 1 spends its time explaining why the birth matters, and setting up our anticipation of it. Luke 1 explains that this birth changes EVERYTHING, it lifts up the lowly, and deposes the powerful so that all will end up being fed.

Mary's song is FIERCE, and beautiful, speaks of the God of our tradition, and the hope of God's people from salvation from oppression. Mary's song, like the rest of Luke 1, tells us why Luke 2 matters.

And then we hear the story itself – a baby was born, in the midst of a crowd (poor Mary) and it was incredibly good news for ALL the people, most notably those who were living in oppression who knew that God was at work to free them.

And Mary “pondered all these things in her heart.”

And so do we. Amen

1John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg point this out in *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Birth* (USA: HarperOne, 2007)

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