

## **BLESSED AMONG WOMEN**

Mary Mother of Our Lord

Luke 1: 46-66

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The Gospel of Luke, above all books of the New Testament, is about women. It contains intimate details which, in my male opinion, would have hardly occurred to a man. It begins with the birth of John the Baptist, focusing on **Elizabeth**, his mother. The next major section is **Mary's** story. And I'll get back to her very shortly. Then follows the prophecy of an old woman named **Anna**. When the boy Jesus went to the temple to debate the learned doctors, the only person Luke quotes is his mother.

Many of Luke's stories from Jesus' ministry are about women: the woman who was a sinner, the woman who wouldn't give up, the widow of Nain, the bent over woman, the widow who gave all she had (her mighty mites). At the resurrection it was only women who had the faith to go to the garden of graves. The text lists Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of Jesus, and other women. Luke reports that when they told the disciples about the empty tomb these men assumed it was an idle tale and did not believe them. **And mind you, all of this from a culture in which women didn't count.**

In the birth narrative from Luke, a story only told in detail by Luke, the central character and the one closest to the event is, **Mary**. There are two ways over the years I have imagined Mary. I have seen her as a frightened little girl, overwhelmed by events far beyond her control -- just a simple, rural, child God had chosen to be the vessel of grace.

But there is another way to view Mary, a way **more faithful** to Luke's text. Here we find a determined, strong, assertive woman; a model for all women -- a woman of power and influence: educated, sharp, committed. It is the resourceful, competent, clear woman from whom Jesus learned much of what he knew about God's will for him and for his world. It is a woman blessed.

The key to this understanding of Mary comes from the words at the heart of today's text. We identify the poem Mary sang by the Latin translation of its first words, the "**Magnificat**," "My soul magnifies the Lord."

So what do we know about her from **Luke**? Not much really -we know the town where she lived, an obscure village in the north, named Nazareth. Luke doesn't identify her family. They were nobodies from noplacel. We know she was engaged to Joseph, a carpenter, whose family had come from the south, from Bethlehem, the city of David. Beyond that Joseph is a faithful, courageous, loyal husband and father who protects his little family, and takes them out of harm's way when Herod the King, in his wild, sick rage, seeks to destroy the infants of Bethlehem. But Luke reports not a word Joseph spoke, or even what he thought about anything.

We know that one day Mary receives a visitor, a messenger, the angel Gabriel. He tells her not to be afraid when she discovers she is pregnant. She has been chosen, favored, to play an important role in world history. Upon hearing the news, "**she was greatly troubled**," says our text. I imagine she was -- it's not every day an angel tells an expectant mother the child she is carrying

is to be called, "the Son of the Most High." He is destined to sit on the throne of David forever.

When she was certain of the pregnancy, Mary does a very feminine thing. She seeks out another woman to talk to. She hears that her cousin, Elizabeth, is also pregnant. Mary makes the very long trip south to the hill country of Judea to visit her friend and her kinswoman. She stays three months. A veil is placed over the details of their conversation. We do not know what they discussed. Had it been a man who had something important to talk about with a male friend, the whole thing would probably have been over in a couple of hours. Men, you see, often are not able to talk intimately with other men. Perhaps we are too competitive. Perhaps to talk deeply is to share more about ourselves and our weaknesses than men are comfortable revealing. If somebody knows about what's going on down inside, he may have an advantage over you. For whatever reasons, which I believe are changing in today's society, it is normally women who can spend endless hours, days and weeks nestled comfortably in each other's souls.

**We do know** that Elizabeth realizes something important has happened to Mary that she has found favor with God and is blessed among women -- **and she says so**. Again, men will hardly offer that gentle kind of affirmation to other men. We might slap each other on the back, but there won't be much tenderness about it. Not so with women. Mutual supports, cooperation, kinship,

gentleness often lie at the heart of their important conversations -- not competition, as to who is the stronger, richer or smarter.

In the musical, *My Fair Lady*, the leading male character asks, **"Why can't a woman be more like a man?"** I'm not certain the world now needs a new crop of competitive, masculine women. The world has enough of dog eat dog competition, jousting for honored places, scratching and kicking your way to the top of the pile. That lifestyle is what causes wars and always has. Perhaps the question for our day is, **"Why can't a man be more like a woman,"** more cooperative than competitive, more intimate than public, more accepting of others than needing to parade the colors, wave the sword and perpetually seek to prove who's number one? And I do believe today's culture has moved somewhat in that direction but has a long way to go.

Anyway whatever the nature of this three-month-long visit, the result, heard from Mary's lips, is anything but the song of a frightened, sweet, ignorant, submissive girl. She sings: **"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."**

It is not an **original song**. Much of it comes from a thousand years earlier. Another strong woman, named **Hannah**, realizes she is pregnant. Her child too will change the direction of Israel. She will call him **Samuel**, and he will finally anoint **David King**. Hannah sings:

**My heart exalts in the Lord; my strength is exalted in the Lord.**

**The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength.**

**The Lord makes the poor rich, he brings low, he also exalts.  
He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy.**

Ten centuries later Mary sings:

**He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud ...**

**He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of  
low degree.**

**He has fulfilled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent  
empty away.**

It appears that Mary have known Hannah's song? If so, she was not the **illiterate** simple girl we have often pictured her as being. Educated, knowledgeable about the scriptures, aware of history and tuned in to the will and plan of God -- **that's the Mary of the Magnificat.**

I have often wondered where Jesus got his view of the world. How is it he identified with the poor, and had such a difficult time with the mighty? Why was he so unmasculine in his rejection of the sword, of violence as the way of the future, of competition as the source of power and wealth? Where did he get the idea that was to be the lynchpin of his life; **that abundance did not lie in doing well but in doing good?** Where did he come upon the notion that God demanded compassion, gentleness, humility; that the meek would inherit the

earth, the merciful obtain mercy, the pure in heart see God and the peacemakers be called God's children?

Listen to the words of Mary's song and you will discover where Jesus got his image of the world and of the will of God. He got it at the knee of his mother. Could it be these were the things Mary and Elizabeth talked about for three months?

In early 1945 two very powerful world leaders, Winston Churchill and FDR met on a ship off the coast of Malta. There they discussed big things, things of import and influence. But perhaps these great men did not have nearly the influence on the world as did two simple women, who met for three months at the home of one of them somewhere in the hill country of Judah and talked.

From their long conversation comes a song, a reflection of **Hannah's** song of long ago. **And from that song has come to us the ethic of Jesus of Nazareth, Prince of Peace, savior of the world.**

So today August 15<sup>th</sup> has been appointed by the Church as the day we especially remember the mother of our Lord.

And so we say Blessed are you, Mary, blessed are you among women. And blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. And blessed are all those who hear him, believe him, follow him in the ways of peace and justice and love. "