

The Jesus Way / **HYMNS OF THE HUMBLE**
The Magnificat
Luke 1:46-55

SKIT: What if it had happened this way?

Well, it didn't happen quite that way! Let's put all this in perspective as we look at what happened next. Luke tells us that, after the angel left, Mary immediately left Galilee and traveled to Judah to visit Elizabeth, her cousin. We find the account in Luke 1:39-45:

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" Luke 1:39-45

The trip from her home (in Nazareth) to her Cousin Elisabeth's house (in the hill country of Judea, somewhere outside of Jerusalem) would have taken about three days by donkey – some ninety miles. Why did she so abruptly leave her fiancé, Joseph, and her home town and go to her cousin's house? Maybe her feminine emotions kept her from sharing immediately with Joseph what she had just learned. Possibly she desired to talk with Elizabeth to confirm what the angel has just shared with her. Or maybe she felt concern for her relative who was now up in years and yet pregnant. In any case, Elizabeth's pregnancy was a sign to Mary of the power of God. *For nothing is impossible with God.* If God could touch Elizabeth, now well up in years, so she could conceive, He could also touch the young Mary who would give birth to deity.

With this additional confirmation of God's power and favor, Mary could no longer contain herself as she expresses her heartfelt praise to God:

⁴⁶ And Mary said:
"My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers.” Luke 1:46-55

We’re beginning a series called *The Jesus Way*, taking a fresh look at the life of Jesus Christ as recounted by the Gospel writers. And the best place to begin is where three of the four gospel writers begin – with Jesus’ birth. But rather than recounting these well-known stories, today and over the next two Sundays we’ll be looking at three of what I’m calling the “Hymns of the Humble.” These are poetic and prophetic hymns of praise spoken by the cast of the nativity story. There are actually five of them, though we’ll be looking at just three. Their titles are taken from the first words of each hymn in the Latin version of the Bible.

- The “Ave Maria” or “Hail Mary” of Gabriel (Luke 1:28-38)
- The “Benedictus” or “Speaking Well” of Zacharias (Luke 1:68-80)
- The “Gloria in Excelsis” or “Glory in the Highest” (Luke 2:14)
- The “Nunc Demittis” or “Let your servant depart” (Luke 2:29-32)

Today, however, we’re looking at the “Magnificat” meaning “My Soul Magnifies” of Mary in Luke 1:46-55 which Lisa just read for us.

GOD FAVORS THE HUMBLE THAT FEAR HIM. Would you say that with me? God favors the humble that fear him.

Let’s “unpack” that idea together. Mary’s hymn of praise flows out of a *humble* heart.

My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the *humble* state of his servant. Luke 1:46-47

And again in verse 51:

...he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the *humble*. Luke 1:51-52

Who are the humble? Mary herself is a good example of humility. She comes from Nazareth. (Map of Israel showing Nazareth) Nazareth was nothing but an obscure Galilean village nearly 90 miles to the north of Jerusalem, the heart of Judaism. The whole area was predominantly Gentile territory and more or less despised by the Jews of Jerusalem. The Jews considered Nazareth half pagan by the simple fact that it was in Galilee. Those who lived there even had a distinct accent that set them apart as being “backwoods” and uneducated. These were the

“rednecks” of 1st Century Israel. The Galileans were considered inferior, illiterate, second class citizens.

Nazareth was also sort of like a half-way house on the main route leading from Tyre and Sidon in the North to Jerusalem in the south. Roman soldiers and Greek merchants found it to be their favorite stopover, bringing with them all the vices of their pagan background. No wonder Nathaniel would later ask the question, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?”

And so the angels watch as the “hero of God” – Gabriel – is sent to planet earth. He bypasses Rome; he bypasses Jerusalem; he bypasses the Temple. But he goes to the pagan and humble town of Nazareth.

Mary may have been as young as 12 years old at this time. She had never traveled far from home. She had no outstanding credentials to boast of on her resume. Later married to a humble carpenter, she bore other children – four sons and several daughters. Any ideas of perpetual virginity or sinless humanity are nothing but figments of the imagination. Mary was a real person like you and me. But it is to this simple, humble person in this simple, humble place that the angel Gabriel comes with the announcement that would change the entire course of history.

Yes, GOD FAVORS **THE HUMBLE** THAT FEAR HIM. Say that with me again. This is a God thing, and in God’s economy things are more often than not “upside down” in comparison to our human, limited perspective. It is not to the great, the mighty, the powerful, the wealthy, the most influential, or even the most gifted that God reveals himself in such splendid ways. No, it seems that consistently God goes to great lengths to identify with the most humble people on earth. As one has put it, “God may be the God of the universe, but he is no elitist.”ⁱ In fact, he “brings down the rulers from their thrones, but lifts up the humble” (v 52).

God is so totally unpretentious! Napoleon argued that God was on the side of the mighty and strong. But he was wrong. God is willing to work through anyone who is willing to be used by him. Externals mean nothing to God. It is all a matter of the heart. Maybe that’s why Augustine put it this way, “Should you ask me what is the first thing in religion? I should reply: the first, second, third thing therein is humility.”

The humble are the best candidates for the impossible. Mary could not advance herself and advance the work of God at the same time. For as Jesus himself says later in this gospel: “He who is least among you all is the one who is great” (Luke 9:48). God wants to do great things through each one of us who name his name. But the first requirement is *humility*. And it really all makes sense. The word humble comes from the Latin word *humus*, meaning clay or dirt. God formed man out of the *humus*, the dust of the ground. It was the breath of God that gave man significance and meaning. To be humble is to be moldable. After all, that’s really all we are ...clay or dirt in the hands of the master Potter.

GOD FAVORS **THE HUMBLE** THAT FEAR HIM. Think about this: if God can take a poor, uneducated, peasant girl and make her the mother of God, don’t you think that God can do something with your life, as well? Maybe you’re here today and you’re feeling small, insignificant, poor and unimportant. If that’s the case, guess what? You’re a likely prospect for God’s surprising touch.ⁱⁱ

But let's take this further. GOD FAVORS THE HUMBLE *THAT FEAR HIM*. In fact, the truly humble *do* fear God. More than that, their fear of God (i.e. their reverence for God, their faith in God, their submission to God) is what makes them humble!

Initially, Mary *is* troubled; she is fearful. I believe that she is first of all fearful of the *circumstances*. In verse 34 she asks, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Skepticism is not all bad. The word in the Greek language means to inquire. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, nor is it unbelief. It is rather that state of mind that hangs suspended between faith and unbelief. Doubt is valuable. Not everything is true, so not everything should be believed. Since not everything is certain, we must make certain of what is true. Doubt keeps faith from being complacent. Doubt, if embraced properly, can flower into full-blown faith.ⁱⁱⁱ

But not only is Mary initially fearful of the circumstances. She is also fearful of *criticism*. What is everyone going to think? You see, Mary was in the betrothal period. This included two phases: First, the formal engagement which included a formal contract and the exchange of a bridal price. Second, about a year later, there was the wedding itself leading to sexual consummation. But since Mary and Joseph were still in this first phase, from a human standpoint there were only two options if Mary was to have a child. Either this child would be conceived by the union of Joseph and Mary, a union punishable by death as it was before the wedding date, or else conceived by someone else. The Jews circulated the story that the real father of Jesus was one named Penthara, one of those Roman soldiers who stopped over in Nazareth on his way south

However, in spite of the circumstances, in spite of the certain criticism, Mary feared God. In this hymn, her attention is turned away from her *circumstances* and away from the *criticism* of others, to the very *character* of God. She knew her God was powerful ("for the Mighty One has done great things for me" Luke 1:49). She knew her God was merciful ("His mercy extends to those who fear him..." Luke 1:50). And she knew her God was faithful ("He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever..." Luke 1:54-55).

This is risky business and Mary is willing to take the risk of faith. Regardless of the social consequences of such a decision and the implications for Mary's reputation, she remains available to God and what He wants to do through her. No mere intellectual assent to what the angel has told her! No mere polite nod to the truth! Mary is willing to lay her life on the line and go all the way, whatever it might cost. Mary places her reputation, her entire womanhood at the disposal of God. She was his slave, to do with as He pleased. Though she faced the risk of slander, ill-repute, disgrace and even death, she essentially says, "Use me as you please. I may not *feel* qualified or usable, but I am available." That is what it means to fear God.

Are you available to God as Mary was? Can you honestly say, "I am the Lord's servant ... may it be to me as you have said?" Are you willing for God to take you far beyond your human limitations? If you are, God will do it, and use you and bless you far beyond what you can imagine.

Why? Because **GOD FAVORS** THE HUMBLE THAT FEAR HIM. That's what Mary experienced. This is stated first by the *angel*: "The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you.'" (Luke 1:28). And just to be sure that Mary got the point, the angel repeats the idea: "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30). But it is also stated by Mary's cousin, *Elizabeth*. As Mary approaches Elizabeth, she exclaims, "Blessed are you among women!" (Luke 1:42). And again in verse 45 – "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said will be accomplished!" And finally, *Mary* realizes herself just how favored and blessed she is. "From now on all generations will called me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me!" (Luke 1:48-49).

GOD FAVORS THE HUMBLE THAT FEAR HIM. Again, let's say that together: "God *favors* the humble that fear him." And this women Mary is "highly favored." You are also to the degree that you humbly recognize that – *apart from Christ* – you have absolutely nothing that can give you salvation or make you effective in His service. Amazingly, that word "favored" (verse 28) is found only one other time in the New Testament (Eph. 1:6) where it means the free gift of grace by which you and I are accepted in Jesus Christ. Here are Paul's words: "to the praise of his glorious grace which he has freely given us in the One he loves" (Ephesians 1:6). A few years later James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote "God opposes the proud, but gives grace [favor] to the humble." (James 4:6).

However, the "face" grace wears is not always a welcome face. Mary was to discover this throughout her life. As Simeon says to Mary in the next chapter of this Gospel: "A sword will pierce your own soul" (Luke 2:35). And how that sword did pierce her soul as she was misunderstood, accused of wearing the "scarlet letter," and as she stood beneath that cross and witnessed the gruesome, agonizing crucifixion of her Son.

But grace is often like that. To teach us patience, grace often wears the face of pain. To bring healing, it may have the face of a surgeon's knife. To bring humility, it may wear the face of defeat and discouragement. These are all rather frightening, unexpected forms of grace. But through it all, God is saying, "Do not be afraid ... you have found grace, favor with God." The challenge before us is to learn as Mary learned – to embrace God's grace, his favor, whatever face or form it may take. For He always, he always has our best in view.

Yes, **GOD FAVORS** THE HUMBLE THAT FEAR HIM. And as we do, we too will cry out with Mary, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour."

ⁱ Darrell Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary – Luke*, 59.

ⁱⁱ He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; Ps 113:7 2 Cor 8:8-9

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. 1 Cor 1:26-31 26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-and the things that are not-to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him. 30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God-that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31 Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Os Guinness, *In Two Minds* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), 45-49.