

## Meditations on the Magnificat: God Levels the Playing Field

### Luke 1:46-55

Luke's Gospel Songs of Advent and Christmas

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Third Sunday of Advent - Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

It is during Christmastime that we recognize that The National Presbyterian Church is fortunate to have so many different musicians to lead us in worship. Today, especially, for the Grace Chimes to play—to lead us in worship and to give the Chancel Choir a day off. The Choir is out there worshipping among the 'ordinary people' this morning. We are grateful for all the musicians who lead us, especially during this Christmastime.

Let us bow in prayer. Majestic God, in Jesus Christ, you speak a word to us of access and love. And so we listen carefully to what your Spirit will say to us now about Jesus, his mother, and the Good News that comes to us in the Gospel of Luke. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I believe that Mary's magnificat, her song, is the heart of the matter of all of Scripture. It is not only the heart of Mary, it is also the heart of Jesus and reflects the heart of God: in the birth of Jesus, no human being has an advantage over another human being. In the eyes of God, we stand as people with equal access. God has leveled the playing field. As Mary said,

God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. The Mighty One has done great things for me [insignificant me]. He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the powerful from their thrones. He has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and he has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel... [that is, his weak and powerless servant, Israel].

Human history and culture tends to teach us that the young should defer to their elders... women should defer to men... the poor should defer to the rich... peasants should defer to royalty... the weak should defer to the strong... the lowly should defer to the high... and the humble should defer to the proud. But in Mary and Jesus, God reverses and puts an end to these human patterns; God turns the world upside down. God levels the playing field.

People of faith— that is, those of us gathered to worship God today in Jesus Christ, who follow the living God in Jesus— are called to live according to these new values; these new moral attributes; these new ethical patterns. It is counter-intuitive, in terms of the world's pattern of life. When we walk with God in the way of Jesus, we are called to level the playing field of human assumptions and activity. We are called to join with what Luke tells us about Jesus' sense of his own ministry, when he quoted Isaiah at the beginning:

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 those who are captive and recovery of sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

God sent Jesus to level the playing field.

It's interesting that, in the last week, we have had a lot of commentary on radio and television about baseball trying to 'level the playing field.' After all, in the steroid scandal, the concern is that some people—because they take body-enhancing drugs— have an advantage over others who don't. There has always been a conversation in baseball about the level playing field; and that is because most of the time there just isn't one. For example, today in professional baseball, the height of the pitcher's mound is not supposed to exceed ten inches; but, between 1903 and 1968, the height limit was set at 15 inches, with some flexibility. And the Los Angeles Dodgers decided to set their mound at 20 inches. Well, those were

the days of Sandy Kofax and Don Drysdale; and they had a certain extra advantage with the extra leverage that they could engage from pitching off of a higher mound. Is there any wonder that 1968 was considered "The Year of the Pitcher"—an era in which there was a definite imbalance between pitchers and hitters? Leveling the playing field gives everyone a more equitable sense of their ability to perform on the playing field.

Another perspective, from a whole different cultural viewpoint, is that today is Beethoven's 237th birthday. You didn't know that, did you? Now, he is known as the great classical musician; but in his day, he was actually the 'rock musician:' he made music accessible for the average person. The more he wrote in the style that he wrote, in the manner and attitude in which he wrote it, the more he gained popularity among ordinary people, and lost popularity with the aristocracy and the church. He was celebrated because he loved to affirm ordinary people. And so it was, at Beethoven's death, a unique thing happened: it wasn't just the aristocracy who showed up; it was 10,000 of his ordinary followers from all parts of Europe. Beethoven leveled the playing field in the world of classical music; he made music more accessible to ordinary people. And the irony of Beethoven, of course, is that, because he refused to be controlled by aristocracy and the church in hierarchy at his time, he propelled music to a much higher level of excellence. The greatest example of this is Ode to Joy, which is in the last movement of his last symphony—that tune we hear so many times these days, which is the bridge between classicism and populism. And, so we see, even in Beethoven, a leveling of the playing field.

Today, I believe, there is a temptation among parents who are very enthusiastic for their children, to try to make the playing field less level: they want their children to have an advantage in education. The concern about this is that parents push their children at the youngest possible age to be competitive in a market that they fear will drown their child on the wrong side. Recently, I heard a teacher say that a parent had said to the teacher about a first-grade child, "My daughter is CEO material, and you need to treat her that way." What does a teacher do with that? The arrogance of parents contributes to the arrogance—and sometimes despair—of children; because we know that children and kids need the space to discover who they are at their own pace. And as we are so often seeing today, it's possible that the sins of the parents might be lived out to the third and fourth generation—because the parents are just too pushy about their kids.

Fortunately, there are many other examples that show more humility. Last week, when I was walking downstairs in the Alternative Gifts at Christmas Market (A.G.C.M.), the director of the Unique Learning Center was there. She told me an amazing story about a young woman who leveled the playing field for one that she was tutoring—a little girl. The young woman, new to the Unique Learning Center a few years ago, on her first night volunteering, was given a young girl to tutor who was resistant and tough to the help that she was given. Several people, in fact, had tried to give her help with math, but they were sorely rebuffed. Many had given up on her and thrown in the towel. She refused to bond with these coaches even though she knew she needed help with her math. And, consistent with her closed pattern, as soon as she saw this new tutor coming toward her, the little girl promptly threw the coat she had over her head to make a tent for herself, and hide. She sent the strong signal: "Just leave me alone." She didn't want to go through another short-term relationship with a tutor—only to have them give up in frustration with her and leave. Fascinated with this predictable behavior, the director watched how this new tutor would handle the resistance. After all, they knew that the battle was either won or lost in the first encounter with this little girl. But they were amazed to see this rather tall young woman get down on the floor next to the little girl, stick her head under the coat and say, "Can I come in there?" The girl was so taken aback, she said "Yes." And the young woman simply sat down beside her, climbed under the coat, and the two sat there underneath the coat, learning math together. Now, as it happens in the surprise of God, that young woman happened to be my daughter, Tonya. I don't say that to brag, but I am sure thankful that she has demonstrated an understanding of leveling the playing field—which Tonya always has done, even in team sports.

When God came to Mary to tell her about the birth of Jesus, God came down to Mary's level; he did not expect Mary to come up to God's level. God climbed into Mary's world. And in the birth of Jesus, God is getting down to our level— even to the level of becoming a little child, meeting us in every way in our humanity, from the very beginning of our origins. God, looking into our hearts and into our lives, is saying to us: "Can I come in there?"

From another ancient carol of the church, the Apostle Paul sang this song in Philippians:

Jesus, the Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited; but he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave and being born in human likeness. And being found in a human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

God lowers the arrogant and lifts up the humble. I believe that today, that call of God, through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is still asking you and me —while we are even in our hiding places...while we are even hurting and not wanting to engage... while we are avoiding contact, even with God— God says, “Can I come in there? I want to be with you. There are things that we can talk about. There are things that I can teach you. I can save you from the pain that you are in and the isolation you feel from the hiding you believe you need to engage in... from the need to protect yourself. I will not hurt you. Can I come in to be with you?”

The Mighty One will do great things for you. God is holy, but God is immediately accessible in Jesus. In a sense, he is the completely unique learning experience: the great teacher; the kind rabbi; but most of all Jesus is one of us. In Jesus, God levels the playing field. He comes down to us; he comes into us; he comes close to us. And he looks with favor upon the lowliness of our humble humanity; and he blesses us with his presence. He gives us his strength; he gives us his knowledge and wisdom; he teaches us about the way to love. He tutors us in the arithmetic of life. He sits with us in the darkness of our alienation. He lifts up the light of his countenance upon us and allows light to break in into the cover. He scatters our proud defenses and breaks down the resistance of our shields. He lifts up our minds and our hearts from the pits, and sends away the rich poverty of our own emptiness. He keeps his promise to make life better.

Can you hear the voice of God in the same way that Mary heard that voice, "Can I come in there?" Will you let God come into the hidden depths of who you are? Will you let Jesus, that baby, change your life?

Let us pray: O, Lord Jesus, we are so grateful that you did not stay in your high and lofty place, but that you would come down and become one of us, that we can hear your voice because it is a human voice that speaks of your love for us. And so we invite your Spirit now, to level the playing field in our hearts—that would not permit arrogance to drive you away but would be the Spirit of humility, to invite you to come close. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.