

Two weeks ago, we began an Advent worship series based on a song recorded in Luke that historically has been titled “The Magnificat.” According to Luke, these words were sung by Mary in response to the proclamation of the angel Gabriel that God would enable her to become pregnant despite the fact that she was not yet married. As I introduced the worship series that first week, I shared how shortly after I began seminary, my mother passed away. I also shared how shortly after that, I became responsible for supporting my 16 year old sister, and how her coming to live with me required that I move from Philadelphia to West Chester.

I also explained how that move led to me serving part time as the youth director of a church, and working two other part time jobs, while continuing to attend seminary full time, and how that arrangement still did not provide me with enough income to pay all my bills. I then shared how I got to the point of thinking I was going to have to drop out of school and get a full time job to solve my financial situation, and how that plight enabled me to sympathize with how frightened and confused Mary must have felt when she heard the words of the angel Gabriel.

As we turned our thoughts to Mary that first week, we looked at how God addressed Mary’s fear and confusion by enabling her to feel comforted. We saw this in the words of Mary in her song: “*for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.*” For the angel had prophesied that her son would not bring her shame and ridicule, but would be “*great . . . and . . . called the Son of the Most High. [And] the Lord God [would] give him the throne of his father David.*” On the second week, we looked at how God addressed Mary’s fear and confusion by enabling her to feel encouraged. We also saw this in the words of Mary in her song: “*the Mighty One has done great things for me.*” For the angel had prophesied that not only would her SON be “*great . . . and . . . called the Son of the Most High, [and be given] the throne of his father David*” but she herself would be “*blessed . . . among women!*” with her name being on everyone’s lips as well.

As we gather together to worship God on the third Sunday of Advent, we therefore look at how God addressed Mary’s fear and confusion by turning to a third phrase Mary’s song. For in that song, Mary echoed biblical ideas that the Church has long understood to be part of what God invites us to be doing in Advent to prepare OUR hearts for Christmas. So in addition to looking at how God gave Mary COMFORT and ENCOURAGEMENT, we move on today to look at how God offered Mary DELIVERANCE.

This is because God wants to do more than just change how we view our circumstances. He wants to actually conquer the things that keep us from walking with Him in joy and peace. This is because we can only be comforted and encouraged for so long if we continue to be frightened and confused, oppressed and harassed, persecuted and downtrodden. To see this we turn to the phrase from Mary’s song printed at the top of your bulletin: “*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.*”

I saw what this phrase is about in the situation from my life that I shared with you. When I reached the point that the income from serving part time as the youth director of a church, and working two other part time jobs, wasn’t meeting my financial needs, and came to the conclusion that I was going

to have to drop out of school and get a full time job, I spoke with one of my professors. This particular professor was not just an ordained clergyperson, however. He was an ordained United Methodist clergyperson. And he wasn't just any ordained United Methodist clergyperson. He was a District Superintendent. In response to my sharing what I thought would happen soon, and how I would not be in the next class in a series of classes he was teaching, he asked if I would be interested in serving as a part-time local pastor. For that position, he explained, might provide a parsonage - and the provision of a parsonage would take a major chunk out of my financial predicament.

When I told him that I would be interested in such a possibility, he told me he would raise it with the bishop. As I left class that day, I felt comforted. A few months later, he told me he had spoken to the bishop, and my name was on his list for consideration. After that conversation, I felt encouraged. But then a few months passed, and there was no phone call. Then more months passed, and there was no response. So, my comfort began to dissipate and my encouragement began to dissolve. But then I finally received a phone call. And in that phone call I not only received new gifts of comfort and encouragement, I also received deliverance.

To see how deliverance is being spoken about in the phrase "*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble,*" we need to do a little digging. That is because this phrase is not just talking about role reversals. It is talking about making things right, bringing about justice, and God being on our side in such a way that we are not only comforted by His presence, and encouraged by His words, but delivered by His actions. To see this, turn with me in your Bible to page 1589, or look at the verses on the screen. For this statement can't be understood without also understanding the other things Mary sang in this particular section.

We see this when we look at what Mary sang right before this phrase: "*His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation,*" and "*He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.*" These words tell us that Mary understood that God does not arbitrarily have it in for those who are wealthy, looking to take away their wealth and give it to others in a socialist kind of way. Nor is God a political kingdom builder, decided for earthly reasons who will rule. Instead, these words tell us that Mary understood that God deals with people according to their relationship with Him. He shows mercy to those who follow Him, blessing not just them but also their descendants. In addition, God (who knows our "*inmost thoughts*") deals with us in ways that respond to what we are like inside, and not just on what appears on the surface.

Following the phrase "*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble,*" Luke tells us Mary went on to sing "*He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty,*" and "*He has helped his servant Israel.*" These words tell us that Mary understood that we need to realize that it is God who ultimately provides for our needs, and that everything we have comes from Him, and that when we do that, we can be "*filled . . . with good things*" spiritually even when we are hungry physically, while those who are rich - despite all they have - will remain spiritually "*empty*" not matter how little they hunger physically. This is because, as her Son would later say in a quote from Deuteronomy, we do not "*live on bread alone, but on every word that*

*comes from the mouth of God.”*

As a result, when I went to Phoenixville, my financial problems weren't instantly solved. But through what God provided, a path for deliverance was created. And as I followed that path, God not only addressed what I thought my needs were, but also other parts of my life HE had plans to develop. For it was in Phoenixville that I met Sandy. And it was by meeting Sandy that God brought Jonathan and Stephen into my life. And it is through a myriad of other things that God did along the path of my life that I was led to where I am today - physically and spiritually.

As we respond to the call to join with Mary in singing “*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble,*” God invites each of us to allow the joy of deliverance to flood our hearts. And He invites us in that flood of joy to join Mary in proclaiming “*my soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*” For God has promised, Luke tells us, that it is not just Mary to whom the angel Gabriel predicted that “*the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*” He will come upon all who, according to Mary's phrasing today are “*humble,*” and will overshadow all who will let Him “*lift*” them up to be delivered from the fears and confusions that so easily occupy our minds.