

Scripture Readings for December 12, 2021

Micah 5:2-5a (NIV)

² “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” ³ Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. ⁴ He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. ⁵ And he will be our peace.

Luke 1:26-33, 46-55 (NIV)

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

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, just as he promised our ancestors.”

Sermon: “The Worries and Joys of Mary”

Some of you will have heard of the truly awful story of a 9-year Afghan girl, Parwana Malik, who was sold as a child bride to a 55-year-old man, because her father needed money to buy food for the rest of the family. This news story made international headlines. Mercifully, a charity¹ stepped in and two weeks later she was returned to her family, at least for the moment. Although it’s technically illegal to marry a girl under the age of 15 in Afghanistan, it’s still a common practice in rural parts of the country. Despite this amazing turn around of events for Parwana, the underlying problem persists and its clearly exacerbated by the nation’s collapsing economy and food shortages. And I am sure this predicament is not unique to Afghanistan. From a Western perspective, women’s rights and freedoms have come a long way in comparison to many parts of the world, even if they still have some way to go. We rightfully see this as social progress and defend them—and want to extend them to women everywhere.

Having perhaps grabbed your attention, let’s consider the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus. I am told that in the 1st century, Jewish girls were usually engaged sometime between the ages of 12 and 15, and would be married sometime thereafter,² at 15 or 16, and boys would have been 19 or 20 years old.³ The trouble is, much of medieval and renaissance art portrays Joseph as a very old man, and this has stuck in our imagination.⁴ It’s true, there is much about Mary and Joseph that we simply *don’t* know. What we *do* know is that after Jesus is 12 years old,⁵ Joseph isn’t mentioned again in the Gospels. The presumption is that he had died sometime before Jesus began his ministry, that is, when Jesus was around 30 years old. And given that Joseph was a carpenter and that they lived in Nazareth,⁶ he may well have worked as a construction worker in the nearby thriving Roman town of Sepphoris. Perhaps he died from an industrial accident or from an illness; we just don’t know, and speculation is pointless. What we do know is that Mary, like many women, must have had a hard life. At the time of their wedding, they were poor with an income that only covered their basic needs.⁷ We also know Mary had other children; Mark tells us she had four other sons - James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas - and at least two daughters.⁸ Yes, a hard life of parenting! We can reasonably guess that she was widowed in her 30s or early 40s. And according to the 4th gospel,⁹ Mary witnessed the death of her first-born son while in her mid-to-late 40s. Crucifixion was not only a horrific way to die, it also brought to Mary the *shame* of having a *criminal* son. And then there is Luke’s unusual birth story of Jesus, part of which we heard this morning.¹⁰

¹ The charity is *Too Young To Wed* (TYTW), whose founder is Stephanie Sinclair.

² This engagement period was typically one year (Culpepper, *Luke*, NIBC, p51.)

³ So says American historian and scholar of early Christianity, Paula Fredriksen, professor emerita of scripture at Boston University, and author of *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (1999).

⁴ An old man of 90 too! But this is based on apocryphal late 2nd century Greek text, the *Protoevangelium/Gospel of James*.

⁵ See Luke 2:41-52.

⁶ Matt 13:54-55; Mark 6:3. (Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth: Luke 1:26; 2:39.)

⁷ See Luke 2:24; Lev 12:8, i.e., lived on subsistence income.

⁸ See Mark 6:3; (cf. Matt 13:55-56; John 2:12; Gal 1:19; we don’t know if Mary remarried; see [9].)

⁹ John 19:25-27. (Here, Jesus also tells John to take care of Mary, as her protector.)

¹⁰ See Luke 1:26-56, 2:1-52.

Last week I mentioned the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth and the social humiliation that she experienced by being childless. Yet the birth of John the Baptist replaced that shame with honor, for he grew up to be a revered prophet. Luke joins Elizabeth's and Mary's stories together, perhaps linking their perceived social disgrace, given that Mary was pregnant but not yet married to Joseph.¹¹ What we *do* know from the four Gospels is that there was some scandal linked to the birth of Jesus,¹² and it appears the Gospel writers were aware of the gossip. Luke and Matthew's birth narratives of Jesus provide some context to the rumours that their readers may have heard.¹³ However much Mary's family may have wanted to hush up the pregnancy, Luke tells us that Mary had a true friend in Elizabeth, regardless of differences in their ages and social status. Recall that John the Baptist's parents were of the priestly class; indeed, Elizabeth was a descendent of Aaron himself, whereas Mary was a lowly peasant girl. Luke reports Elizabeth's affirmation to Mary when they first meet: "*Blessed* are you among women and *blessed* is the child you will bear!"¹⁴ Any stories casting aspersions on Mary and on the birth circumstances of Jesus are countered by Elizabeth's defense of her relative, Mary. Elizabeth, who herself had long experience of social gossip and disgrace, is unconcerned by Mary's social predicament. Instead of being tainted by association with the family scandal, Elizabeth responds, "*Why am I so favored* that the mother of my Lord should come to (visit) me?"¹⁵ Recall too the angel Gabriel's opening message to Mary was: "*Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.*"¹⁶ Luke through his account of the Gabriel's conversation with Mary, and through Mary's later meeting with Elizabeth, presents Mary as someone who was *obedient* to God's call on their life¹⁷ *regardless* of the potential for scandal or humiliation. That's a sobering thought for Advent when we prepare for the coming of Jesus.

Why do I mention all this? Well, let me first assure you I intend *no* disrespect toward Mary, but we need some honesty in relating her story. Church tradition, perhaps in response to early rumours, has tried to venerate Mary and in the process robbed her of her humanity. She has been portrayed as a perpetual virgin, so denying that Jesus had siblings, as having lived a sinless life, and even of a direct assumption or elevation to be with God. While Protestants don't believe this, we are *all* influenced by Mary's image of perfection, and this saintly portrayal is implied in many a Christmas card. What I am saying is that the biblical evidence is that Mary was indeed special, in that she was favored by God for a specific role

¹¹ See Luke 2:5.

¹² Some scholars treat John 8:41; 9:29 as a veiled reference to Christ's (questionable) birth. Mark 6:3 describes Jesus as the "son of Mary," appears to be somewhat derogatory, for a man was not regarded as his mother's son in Jewish usage unless an insult was intended (cf. Judg 11:1-2). See also [8].

¹³ The story of the "virgin" birth is not mentioned in Mark's or John's Gospels, or by Paul, see Rom 1:1-7, where Paul stresses the resurrection (v4)—rather than the birth (v3)—of Jesus. More generally, Paul's scandalous message was of "Christ *crucified*," which was considered shameful and offensive to Jews. Moreover, death by crucifixion meant that the person was deemed a rebel or a criminal and so for non-Jews, Jesus was not a credible person to follow; 1 Cor 1:18-25.

¹⁴ Luke 1:42-45. Luke presents this as Holy Spirit inspired speech, Luke 1:41!

¹⁵ Luke 1:43; Elizabeth continues: "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" (v -45). The phrase "mother of *my Lord*" is clearly a (later) Christian title for Mary.

¹⁶ Luke 1:28, see also v30.

¹⁷ See Luke 1:38, 45.

in salvation history and therefore someone rightly to be honored. Nevertheless, she was fully human, and she had a *tough life*. She experienced all the worries of being a parent,¹⁸ and then some! - including early widowhood and being a single mom. I say this because I know that life has been difficult for many of you, especially for mothers. Luke's stories of Mary and Elizabeth acknowledges that fact, and I want you to be *encouraged* by their stories. If church history's portrayal of them is idealized and sentimentalized, then we have been robbed of potential role models of strong women in the Bible. And we also need to be reminded again and again, that faithfully following God does not guarantee that life will be a bed of roses.

Having said that, life also has wonderful moments of *affirmation* and *joy*! And because none of us know the future, we need to "treasure those moments in our hearts," something that Luke tells us twice that Mary herself did.¹⁹ When Mary meets Elizabeth and they share their exciting news of their pregnancies, Mary responds with a joyful song of praise, known traditionally as the *Magnificat*.²⁰ We will explore its contents briefly in a moment, but what is perhaps odd is Mary's joy is not so much about herself, but about what God is about to do through her life and that of Elizabeth, and through their respective sons. Many contemporary mothers on hearing this may be annoyed; it's *not* very feminist; it sounds like just more self sacrifice for the family. The words of Mary's song can also sound super-spiritual, so fostering that stereotypical image of Mary's piety. Consequently—and despite the important differences in cultural situations and expectations between then and now—instead of Mary's life experience being a potential point of connection, we are perhaps turned off by her apparent religious exuberance.

I suggest that we are in grave danger of making serious category mistake here. Luke is using a well-established and widely-understood mode of writing to communicate something important to his readers through words he places on the speaker's lips in their speeches and songs.²¹ Teenage Mary is *not*, on top of everything else, now being introduced as brilliant poet and songwriter here! And neither would Mary be an Old Testament scholar, yet there are numerous references to the psalms and the prophets in her song. No, through this writing convention, Luke is interpreting the *meaning* of events for his readers. And yes, that meaning is a cause for great celebration and *joy*! Stylistically, Luke is also paralleling the song of Hannah, the mother of Samuel—another significant person in God's plan of salvation for his people.²² Luke is again reminding his readers that Mary is one of those great women of the Hebrew Scriptures.

So, Mary bursts into joyful song, singing: "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. From now on all generations will call

¹⁸ See: Luke 2:41-52; Mark 3:31-35; Matt 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21.

¹⁹ Luke 2:19, 51. Those words are evidently part of the early oral Christian tradition of which Luke knew.

²⁰ Luke 1:46-55. The term *Magnificat* is the first words of the song in Latin: "[My soul] *magnifies* [the Lord]".

²¹ This is evident not just in the speeches of Elizabeth, Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon, but in the sermons of Peter, Paul, and Stephen in Acts.

²² See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Do-We-Want-A-Saviour.pdf> .

me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.”²³ Luke is stressing that Mary reputation for all time is as one truly blessed or honored by God and not as one steeped in social shame or suspicion or guilt. You will remember that Jesus later said, “There are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.”²⁴ Mary is one of those of the last and the least who is honored by her faithfulness to God. That shocking role reversal is a feature of the kingdom of God, as presented in the Beatitudes. Hear again those words from Luke’s account and apply them to Mary’s situation: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. *Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in God’s kingdom.*”²⁵ Of course, these blessings don’t *only* apply to Mary, but they *are* modelled by her behavior and they point to a long-held Jewish hope being realized when the Messiah comes. And Luke, through Mary’s song, then continues to foreshadow the *kind* of person Mary’s son will become.²⁶ And that’s a source of joy *for all people*, as the angel later told the shepherds,²⁷ but especially for those whose life has been hard.

One of the things Luke presents through the words of Gabriel and in Mary’s song is *God’s* viewpoint or God’s bigger picture. Throughout the rest of his Gospel, Luke will flesh that perspective out in detail for his readers. Luke’s focus is often on *ordinary* people, like Mary and Joseph, and I suggest that their life stories can therefore be a source of inspiration, comfort, and hope, and which in turn can lead us to better grasp the Jesus story as a whole. Elizabeth and Mary understood social shaming, however caused or perceived, including childlessness or having children who are now in jail, or abortion, divorce, etc. They also knew that such things *didn’t* preclude them from receiving God’s blessing, rather the opposite – they became a blessing to others – because God has always partnered with surprising people in unexpected ways. The God who lifts up the humble and the faithful is evidently not concerned about scandal! In fact, the *ultimate* scandal is that a holy God would enter into our human life with all its vice, violence, and corruption. Rather than abandoning us to the consequences of our own sinfulness and folly, God has sent us Jesus as our deliverer and *that’s* the good news the angel Gabriel announced to Mary. Who needs to hear Gabriel’s greeting to Mary again today: “*You are highly favored! The Lord is with you.*” Absorb those words and be affirmed and blessed by them as we continue to prepare for the coming of our Lord, in hope, in peace, and in joy. Amen. Let us pray.

²³ Luke 1:46-49. The word “servant” needs to be linked to Luke 1:38. [cf. 1 Sam 2:1 and Luke 1:46. Hannah and Mary would both agree: “There is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God,” (1 Sam 2:2). Both women burst forth in joyful praise and both songs portray contrasting comparisons and the reversal of social fortunes. Furthermore, one cannot ignore the Song of Miriam (Moses’ and Aaron’s sister – and Mary’s namesake) in Exod 15:1-18, which begins: “I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted” and ends, “The LORD reigns for ever and ever.”

²⁴ See Luke 13:30; Matt 19:30; 20:16; Mark 10:31.

²⁵ Luke 6:20-23 (cf. Matt 5:3-12; Luke 1:50-56). Note the sense of irony and a passion for social justice.

²⁶ Cf. Luke 1: 32-33, 50-55 and Luke 4:18-21. See also [22].

²⁷ Luke 2:10-12.