

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴⁶And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.(Luke 1:46-47)

By rights, the year of our Lord 1521 should have been an awful year for Martin Luther, for that was the year when he was officially rejected by both heaven and earth – at least as far as earthly authorities could decide the matter. The year just before – 1520 -- the Papal bull "Exsurge Domine" had been issued, threatening Luther with excommunication if did not repent and renew his obedience to his ecclesiastical superiors. Now, in the year 1521, Luther was formally excommunicated. And that's a worrisome thing for a medieval man – indeed for any Christian. Besides that, 1521 was the year when Luther was summoned to the Diet of Worms. There he took his brave stand, holding his conscience captive to the Word of God and refusing to recant his Reformation teachings, but with the frightening result that he was condemned by the Diet of high treason, with his life forfeit to the law. A bad year for Luther, I say, rejected by both heaven and earth, or at least by authorities in those realms.

Yet, nothing seems able to have suppressed Luther's joy about Christmas. He loved Christmas! He wrote Christmas hymns, preached wonderful Christmas sermons, and in that same year, 1521, he wrote one of the most beautiful treatises within the fifty-four volumes of the American edition of *Luther's Works*. It is his commentary on Mary's *Magnificat*. It is as if his own personal troubles did not exist, or at least did not matter. What did matter to him was this maiden girl, Mary, and even more, her Son, our Lord, Jesus.

In this sermon, I want to lift up one of Luther's themes about Mary: her lowliness. I am happy about this theme and eager to share it with you, because, from time to time, we are they! We are among the lowly. Sickness, poverty, loneliness, addiction, unemployment: many forces in life can come along and knock us down. But if that should happen... if it should be happening right now to you... then by no means conclude that heaven has forgotten you. Jesus was born of a lowly woman. He could have been born in a palace, the son of princess, but no, he was born to a lowly village woman. His birth to one of low estate is an everlasting testimony to us that we can never fall so far as to beyond God's sight, nor his love.

So, Luther rejoices in Mary's lowliness. Let me begin to develop this theme by quoting his line about "certain scribblers." He means writers: theologians and preachers. But Luther does not much respect their writings, and so calls them scribblers. The topic is "Mary the Mother of God." Luther writes this:

Though certain scribblers make much ado about her worthiness for such motherhood, I prefer to believe *her* rather than them. She says her low estate was *regarded by God*, not thereby rewarding her for anything she had done, but, "*He* has done great things for me," He has done this of His own accord without any doing of mine.

Notice that Luther is not denying the traditional description of Mary as "Theotokos," which means, "Mother of God." For Luther, the issue is not whether Mary is Theotokos, for surely she is, but rather the question, To whom does the glory belong for this? Luther is determined to say that the glory belongs to God, not to Mary. Furthermore, he says that Mary would not want the glory, for what she rejoices in is not herself, but God's gracious regard for her lowly estate.

And we can see this in this morning's Gospel story. By rights, Mary could have summoned her kinswoman, Elizabeth, to come and visit her. After all, though Elizabeth's pregnancy in old age was a wonder, it was not as wonderful as Mary's pregnancy, for Mary was bearing the Christ Child. But Mary seems not even to think of that, but instead she "arose and went with haste into the hill country," to see Elizabeth. And my! What a prayer meeting those two ladies held!

But do you see my point: Mary, though she bears the very Son of God glories not in herself, but in the Lord's gracious regard for the lowly.

Let me carry on this theme with some of Luther's powerful way of stating things:

Behold, how completely she traces all to God, lays claim to no works, no honor, no fame. She conducts herself as

before, when she still had nothing of all this; she demands no higher honors than before. She is not puffed up, does not vaunt herself or proclaim with a loud voice that she is become the Mother of God. She seeks not any glory, but goes about her usual household duties, milking the cows, cooking the meals, washing pots and kettles, sweeping out the rooms, and performing the work of maidservant or housemother in lowly and despised tasks, as though she cared nothing for such great gifts and graces. She was esteemed among other women and her neighbors no more highly than before, nor desired to be, but remained a poor townswoman, one of the great multitude. Oh, how simple and pure a heart was hers, how strange a soul was this! What great things are hidden here under this lowly exterior! How many came in contact with her, talked, and ate and drank with her, who perhaps despised her and counted her but a common, poor, and simple village maiden, and who, had they known, would have fled from her in terror.

And so we have Luther's great theme about Mary the Mother of Our Lord: Mary teaches us how to magnify the Lord. She teaches us what to be happy about in this world. She lifts up her eyes from herself and from any of those things of which we poor humans are prone to boast... she removes her gaze from such herself and such things and looks only to God. And in looking to him, she finds delight for her soul, for she sees that our God is the One who regards even the lowly ones of this earth.

In a Christian congregation, chances are that some of us are among the lowly. Some of us might be maids or menservants, duty-bound to our "usual household duties, milking the cows, cooking the meals, washing pots and kettles, sweeping out the rooms, and performing the work of maidservant or housemother in lowly and despised tasks." Some of us might be the master or the mistress of the house or of the business, and yet, laid low, at least for a while, by sickness or stress in the marketplace, or younger, talented people on the rise.

And our whole blooming world might for a season be at low ebb, beset by calamities, wars, and threatening technology.

But Mary teaches us to never fear that we will be overlooked, for our God is the God of the overlooked.

A few weeks back I mentioned to you about the visit of the Bukoba Choir to our city — the way

they would burst into song sitting there on the Staten Island Ferry or having supper at Wendy's. It seems to me that these brothers and sisters from Tanzania give us living, human examples of people like Mary — people of low estate who rejoice with all their heart to think that God regards them and loves them.

I mean, these Christians from Tanzania had little money. They walked with joy along the sidewalks of Manhattan, but if they had slipped into Macy's to buy things, they would have used up much of their life's savings in one fell swoop. They came without health insurance into the unfamiliar cold. Their coats and shoes were inadequate — some even wore sandals. My wife Carol gave thanks to God daily that the weather that weekend was unseasonably warm!

So, these African brothers and sisters of ours did not have much, by American standards, but this they did have: the gospel conviction that whatever they did have comes from God who loves them most tenderly and means to care for them.

If you were to ask them how their trip to the U.S. came about, they would give all the credit to God. In fact, whatever good things come to them, they attribute to God's great mercy, lovingkindness and generosity.

They are grateful, they feel blessed. They believe that God has much more in store for them — much good!

When they said good-bye to Carol, they said, "If we don't see you again before we leave, we'll see you in heaven!" They believed it, and in believing it they rejoiced and magnified the Lord.

Like Mary, though they were lowly, with hardly a dollar in their pockets, they believed they had reason for joy, reason to sing, reason to proclaim the greatness of the Lord.

And we too have reason — not because we are either rich or poor, high or low, but rather for the splendid Gospel reason that that's the kind of God we have: a God who looks with love upon *everyone* and overlooks *none*! That's my theme for this sermon. Whether or not we are lowly, we have a Lord who regards the lowly — indeed, who rushes off from heaven to be born in mean circumstances, in Bethlehem's manger, if only by some means he can be near to the lowly and can be their Saviour.

And so, please hasten back to church this evening for the Christmas Eve liturgy. With candles and carols, Bible and preaching, prayers and sacrament we mean to give thanks to this kind of a God, the One content to be born in a rough world that you and I might have a Saviour, to whom glory belongs, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.