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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/20/2009, Advent 4C  
Luke 1:39-55  
Joining Mary's Joy

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

<sup>46</sup>And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord," <sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, (Luke 1:46, RSV)

The older I get, the more delight I take in young parents. I am awfully grateful for my experience back as a young father. Having our sons was the most moving thing Carol and I have known. One of my favorite things I do as a pastor is to go to the hospital and to say the prayers of thanksgiving for the safe birth of baby and mother. I have done that for some of you here. Mother and father will soon look haggard, I know, but my! You should see them glowing in the hospital. They are radiant, as if joy is emanating from them like sunlight from that fiery orb above.

So it is with young Mary in this morning's Bible story. She is pregnant, she is happy about it, and she bursts forth in a song. I'm not musical, and it would never occur to me to express joy by creating a song, opening my pipes and singing it. But it does occur to young Mary. That's her good nature.

The song she sings, which we call *The Magnificat*, is a song drenched in Biblical language and faith. Like a blue grass musician or an artist who picks up any old thing at hand - a washboard, a piece of chalk - and begins making beauty, so Mary picks up themes from the Bible and makes a merry song from them. Especially she delights in God's regard for the lowly. Young village girls like Mary are often overlooked in this world, but not by the *Maker* of this world. Mary is pleased by that and sings of it. And her joy leaps outward, far beyond herself. She is a happy girl, not just because the Lord has looked with favor upon her, but because in looking with favor upon her, the Lord has commenced his salvation of Israel, indeed of the whole world.

Mary's song is so lovely and so full of faith that it has been treasured and sung in the church down through the centuries, as we sang it earlier in this liturgy. Indeed, somewhere on this globe of ours, it is probably being sung at all times, since it is at the heart of the Vespers liturgy, and that liturgy is always being sung as the sun continually slips below the horizon of our rotating planet. We just can't do much better than this, and so the whole Church joins Mary in her Magnificat: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord..."

This past Friday evening, Carol and I attended a wonderful musical on Broadway called *Billy Elliot*. It featured great music, splendid dancing, and a moving story. There was two points in the story where I simply wept, with tears rolling down my face. They both involved a letter -- one a letter from Billy Elliot's mother to her twelve year-old son. She had died. He was a twelve-year old boy,

bereft of his mother, in a tough world. But she had written him a letter, which she and Billy's dance teacher sang aloud, in a moving duet. And the heart of the letter was simply the mother saying how proud she was to have been the mother of little Billy Elliot. And then, at the end of the play, Billy sang a similar song to his departed mother, saying how grateful and proud he was to have been her son. Again, the tears streamed down for Carol and me, and I bet for many people in the congregation. There is something about mother's love that is simply wonderful. It is the best thing many of us will know on this old earth of ours.

Mother's love tends to be constant and charitable. And so it would not be surprising if Mary should commend her Son to us, as if we should love him too, as she does. But she has a special reason for bidding us to join her in loving her Son: she has *seen* what he has done for us. She beheld his young life, the purity of it and his self-discipline. He saw his total dedication to the will of his heavenly Father and therefore to the welfare of our human race. And chief of all, she saw him die on the Cross for you, for me.

First off, let us ponder the human reality that Mary raised Jesus. Our God entrusted himself to a young woman to get started in this world. He did not entrust himself to angels, nor to an institution, but to a human being. He was unwilling to be raised apart from a woman.

This plain human reality, that the One we worship as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, was raised by a mother, from a helpless infant to a grown man, is lifted up in a recent ecumenical statement on Mary. It is called *Do Whatever He Tells You: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Christian Faith and Life A Statement of Evangelicals and Catholics Together*.<sup>1</sup> The Statement makes many interesting points about Mary, including this one about her role as mother, like other good mothers in this world:

We picture her nursing him at her breast, teaching him his first words, kissing his bruises when he fell, introducing him to Israel's understanding of the ways of the Lord—the mother who helped him memorize the psalms and say his prayers, even as he grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man (Luke 2:52).

And so when Jesus is dying on the Cross, and his lips so ready begin to quote Psalm 22, it is nice to think that he is returning to his childhood teaching. He is returning to the lessons he learned at the knee of someone so steeped in Israel's faith that she could sing her *Magnificat*.

So, that is the first thing I want to point out about Mary: she is one of God's true blessings on earth. I mean, simply, that she is a mother doing the best she can to raise her Son.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/10/do-whatever-he-tells-you-the-blessed-virgin-mary-in-christian-faith-and-life>

The second thing I want to mention is that, like many a mother, Mary suffered along the way of raising and watching her Child.

Bishop N.T. Wright, a wonderful modern New Testament scholar, notes these things about Mary:

A sword will pierce her soul, she is told when Jesus is a baby. She will lose him for three days when he's twelve.<sup>2</sup> She will think he's gone mad when he's thirty.<sup>3</sup> She will despair completely for a further three days in Jerusalem, as the God she now wildly celebrates seems to have deceived her (that, too, is part of the same Jewish tradition she draws on in this song). All of us who sing her song should remember these things too. But the moment of triumph will return with Easter and Pentecost, and this time it won't be taken away.<sup>4</sup>

Do not think of Mary as calm, untroubled, nor unfamiliar with the things that trouble the rest of us. We join her in loving her Son, and she joins us in the sorrows that sometimes come the way of those who love Jesus.

So, those are the first two things I want to say about Mary: she raised him and she suffered along the way of raising him. But the chief thing I want to say about Mary is that she was a faithful disciple of her son and she bids us to be the same.

Martin Luther certainly loved and praised Mary. So did many of the early Reformers. Naturally, it is possible to praise Mary overmuch, that is, it is possible to praise Mary apart from Jesus. But that is not the way of the Church. The Church never wants to distract people from Jesus, not even for the sake of Mary.

Consider this saying from St. Augustine:

“Indeed the blessed Mary certainly did the Father's will, and so it was for her a greater thing to have been Christ's disciple than to have been his mother, and she was more blessed in her discipleship than in her motherhood. Hers was the happiness of first bearing in her womb him whom she would obey as her master” (Sermon 72A.7).

And that is a true observation about Mary and a way in which she is a good example for us. Through thick and thin, Mary followed her Son. She was with him in the stable at his birth, in Egypt when she and Joseph fled there to protect him. She was with him at the foot of the Cross. She was filled with his Spirit at that first

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<sup>2</sup> Next Sunday's Gospel Lesson tells us this story – the story of twelve-year-old Jesus lingering in the Temple while his parents searched for him. Of course, we have many good miles to travel before we get to then, including our great Christmas Eve and Christmas Morning liturgies here at Immanuel.

<sup>3</sup> “When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’” (Mark 3:21, NRSV)

<sup>4</sup> Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, 2004 Nicholas Thomas Wright), pages 14-15.

Pentecost. There is no understanding of Mary that does not see that she continually points toward her Son. Again, this thought is beautifully put into words by the recent Catholic/Evangelical statement:

Mary is always and ever a creature among creatures and no less in need of redemption than any other human being, Jesus only excepted. Mary is always and ever in the role of subordinate and servant. As she said to the angel, “Behold, the handmaid of the Lord” (Luke 1:38). Her message, first spoken to the servants at the wedding of Cana, and also to us, is simply this: “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5).

This is Mary’s call that could well always echo in our hearts: *Whatsoever he saith unto you to do, do it.*” *Whatsoever* he saith to you, it will be some form of love -- love for you and a call for you to love your neighbors. *Whatsoever* he saith unto us, let us do it, till the day comes when we see him in the manner Mary saw him long ago: face to face, heart speaking to heart, the saved speaking to their Saviour.

For me, one of the loveliest things we do here at Immanuel is singing *Beautiful Savior*, especially when we sing the third verse *a cappella*. I cannot help but think that Mary is proud of us then, that we have recognized what she recognized from the moment of his conception: that our Lord Jesus is a Beautiful Savior, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.