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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
8/15/2010, Mary, Mother of Our Lord¹
Luke 1:46-55, RSV

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

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

Let me begin this sermon by referring again to a poem I received and mentioned years ago. Once upon a time a homeless man on our city sidewalks handed me a handwritten poem. The poem was called simply “A Poem to the Lord,” and it started off like this:

My Father, Lord and master,
I’m confused and my entire life is a disaster.
My Lord can you hear me?

And then later:

But I’m tired of the devil’s game.
For my soul ache of shame.

You understand, I am sure, that when a homeless man gives you a poem, it is probably his only copy. He doesn’t have an office; he doesn’t have a photocopy machine. He puts his broken heart into words, gives it to a passerby, and it is gone from him.

The poor man’s question here, “My Lord can you hear me?” is a good part of the reason for this morning’s festival of Mary, the Mother of our Lord. To the homeless man’s question, “My Lord can you hear me?” Mary has an answer: “Yes, dear man, our God can hear you.” Indeed, our God is one who especially regards *the lowly*. The down-and-out are never so far down and out that they are beyond his compassion. His gaze drives down to the depths of humanity, to the lowest, dustiest, foulest places. And he raises them up! He is glad to do so. If we are willing, he will start raising us up right now. Come to Jesus! And in the fulfillment of time, he will raise us up fully to live in righteousness before him forever.

Many a Christian has praised Mary for her purity and for her high privilege in bearing the Christ Child. But Mary herself seems to pay no mind to such matters.

¹ This sermon is a reworking of my sermon on Mary from 2004.

Her *Magnificat* does not sing of her own virtue, but of her Lord. And so it is that she teaches us to tug away our admiring gaze from ourselves and to look instead with gratitude upon the Lord.

That is, Mary teaches us first of all to become more humble people. Martin Luther puts the point this way:

Tell me, was not hers a wondrous soul? She finds herself the Mother of God, exalted above all mortals, and still remains so simple and so calm that she does not think of any poor serving maid as beneath her. Oh, we poor mortals! If we come into a little wealth or might or honor, or even if we are a little prettier than other men, we cannot abide being made equal to anyone beneath us, but are puffed up beyond all measure. What should we do if we possessed such great and lofty blessings? (LW 21, page 308)

Mary rejoices, not because she is good, but because the Lord is. He is her hope in this world. He is the hope that she wants all the suffering people of the world to have. She sings her song because the Lord regards *the lowly*.

This is the old testimony of the Psalms – a testimony that Mary knows in her bones, for she has experienced the truth of it in her own life. Listen to Psalm 113 sing of the compassion of our Lord:

⁴ The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens.

⁵ Who is like unto the LORD our God, who dwelleth on high,

⁶ Who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth!

⁷ He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill; (Ps 113:4-7, KJV)

Notice the great elevation credited to the LORD²: “He is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens.” “Above the nations... above the heavens.” From such a height, the Lord can survey all his creation, and we can be confident that it gives him pleasure to survey it, save for the sin. It grieves the Lord to see people turn to sin, for he created us not for sin, but for good works, that we might walk in them. But setting aside the misery of sin, the Lord from his great elevation can survey his creation – a creation about which he judged “And behold, it was good.” He beholds the angels and is pleased by them. He regards the mighty whale, whom he created for sport. His gaze takes in presidents and kings and senators and wealthy folk and artists and scientists, and it would be natural to linger with them and their glory. But it is characteristic of the true God

² I am quite sure I got this lovely idea from the English Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon -- the idea of the Lord’s elevation permitting him to survey even the heavenly host . But I have checked his exposition of Psalm 113 and cannot find it there. Nonetheless, I think he deserves the credit for this idea.

that his eyes keep driving downward, like a good shepherd in search of a lost sheep, going down and down all the way to the poor man lying in the dust and the needy person collapsed on the dunghill.

There is no vision on earth that is more clear, more sympathetic, and more determined to make things better than the Lord's. If we are low, God sees us, no matter how far down we might have slipped. He sees the rich man, but also the poor one. He sees the saint, but also sees the sinner. He sees that well-to-do rancher, but also sees the dusty cowboy working the herd.

Think of the foot soldier on the battlefield. Naturally, the television reporters are interested in the general. The eye of the camera is drawn to the stars on the shoulder board of the great soldier. But the eyes of God regard the general, with love, surely, but then hasten on down to the soldier dying on the battlefield, shot in the gut, dying, perhaps never having been kissed, not even once, dying and crying for his mother³. Oh! There is a hard, hard world out there, and Mary sings because God sees it. The lowliness, the suffering, the moral wrecks of this world are not put out of the divine mind. The Lord sees, cares, and is determined to set things right. He is determined to lift up the lowly:

⁷ He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill; (Ps 113:4-7, KJV)

Long ago, Sister Nellie Scott taught me the Sunday School hymns: "Jesus Loves Me," and so on. She was a simple farmer's wife, but a considerable Christian. Likewise, here at Immanuel we had Florence Becker next door teaching the children the Sunday School hymns, playing the piano with one finger as she led them. Likewise with Ann Siemer, and others here at Immanuel. They taught us how to sing the faith of the Church.

So it is with Mary, the Mother of our Lord. Her *Magnificat* is a model for the Church of faith and piety. She teaches the Church how to sing to God. Her song is a great prayer of divine praise. It has been cherished by the Church through the ages, and evening by evening across this old globe of ours, Christians sing along with her song as best we can as we sing her *Magnificat* in the Evening Prayer liturgy, Vespers. And in singing her *Magnificat*, we have been plunging into a song of a great lady of faith. Nellie Scott was faithful, Florence Becker was faithful. But so too was that young village girl who had enough faith in God to say to him,

And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. (Luke 1:38)

³ Stephen Hunter has a line like this about young soldiers in one of his novels about his character Bob Lee Swagger, *Night of Thunder*.

Christians sometimes refer to her as “Mother Mary.” And why not? It is proper for a mother, a father, to teach the one young ones. Mother Mary teaches us to sing of the divine condescension and compassion of our Lord. “Come, children,” we can imagine her saying even now, “let us sing of God and of his goodness.”

As it turned out, Mary made no error in singing of the merciful regard of God for the lowly. Soon, she was able to see for herself the truth of her *Magnificat*, for *she was able to regard* with love her son, the only begotten Son of God the Father, *as he regarded* with love our world. Soon it was that she was testifying to others that there was something extraordinary about her son, so that the world would do well to listen to him. And so we have her great sermon: “Whatsoever he saith to you to do, do it.”

She lived to see his miracles, to see his compassion on the leper, on the demon-possessed, on the sinner, even on the dead.

She became his disciple. It became with her as the ancient preachers imagined her to say, “The One I hold, holds me.” Indeed, he holds this whole world in his hands, and that is very good news for us.

And you, my friends: you and I might feel at some time during our lives that we are shipwrecked upon the rocks of misfortune, ill-health, or immorality. We might suppose that we have fallen so low, we can no longer be seen, that we have indeed melted right away into the molecules of the dung heap. But if so, if we should feel such discouragement, let’s sing Mary’s song. If our singing voices are weak, let us sing on anyway. Though our voices should be discouraged or shaky, let’s form her words, apply them to ourselves, and know that they are true:

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

To our God who sees even the lowly, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be the glory, now and forever. Amen.