

Mary has been visited by Gabriel and has been given – and accepted – the astounding news that she, young, unmarried, nobody special in the eyes of the world, will give birth to a son who will be “the Son of the Most High.” In the wake of this jaw-dropping, life-transforming news, Mary says, “let it be with me according to your word.” She is also told that her older, barren cousin, Elizabeth, is pregnant because “nothing will be impossible with God” the angel says.

Mary rushes off to visit her cousin to see this amazing deed of God for herself. At the sound of Mary’s voice, the as-of-yet unborn John the Baptist leaps with joy within Elizabeth and Elizabeth somehow knows that the young woman before her is carrying God’s promised Messiah.

Elizabeth blesses Mary. She proclaims that Mary is blessed because Mary believed God’s promise – a promise made ages earlier to Abraham, to his son and grandson, to Moses, and to a wayward people through the voices of the prophets. It is a promise forgotten by many and disregarded by the disenchanted – “God is not at work in our lives,” they say. “God has abandoned us, we make our own way in the world now.” But it is a promise cherished by many, by those faithful to God’s word. And Mary, it turns out, is one of those faithful. She believes that God will fulfill the ancient promise – God will redeem all those who follow his ways; God will restore the faithful into relationship with him through the Messiah.

Mary believes. Elizabeth acknowledges her belief with a blessing and, in response to this blessing, Mary sings the words we have come to know as the *Magnificat*. Mary praises God and describes for us what the fulfillment of God’s promise will look like. But, the amazing thing is, she doesn’t talk about this fulfillment as if it is

some great event that will happen at some point down the road. She doesn't even wait until her baby is born, let alone grow up enough to lead her people. Mary's song of praise and thanksgiving tells us that God's promise *is* fulfilled. How can this be?

Let's take a look together, first, at Mary's song and what she tells us about God's promise. Mary begins by voicing the realization that not just Elizabeth but all women, all people in fact, from then on are going to call her blessed. She is overwhelmed with joy – her spirit rejoices in God her Saviour she tells us. Her soul magnifies the Lord. The word “magnifies” is where we get the title of her song – the Magnificat – the Latin word for magnify. Her soul magnifies, her spirit rejoices – Mary is praising God from the very core of her being, every ounce of her, every last inch of her, is praising the greatness of God. She is blessed and her response to this blessing is to point to the greatness of God and the joy she receives from God's blessing.

Blessing in our society has come to mean the good things that we have. We are blessed with family, friends, health, a roof over our heads, food on our tables, clothes in our closets, and so on. Not everything goes our way all the time but, overall, we feel blessed living lives of relative privilege and comfort.

This idea of being blessed is not at all what Mary – or Elizabeth – were talking about when telling us that Mary is blessed. We know that Mary was not “blessed” with wealth or status: she speaks of God looking with favour on the “lowliness of his servant.” Mary rushed off to visit Elizabeth by herself – a woman of any wealth or status would have had at least one maid accompanying her. Mary is about to experience what we would most definitely not label as being

blessed – she’s pregnant and not by her fiancé. She is going to have to endure a lot of sideways glances and some mean words by those who believe she must have been unfaithful to Joseph and think she deserves to be stoned to death. On top of that, this young mother is going to hear from a reliable old prophet named Simeon that her son – and she too – will suffer. And yet, Simeon blesses her as he tells her these things. Simeon blesses her, knowing of her coming sorrow.

Elizabeth blesses her knowing of her coming disgrace in the eyes of the locals.

Blessing is not about good times or comfortable lives. Blessing is being honoured by God. Blessing is being chosen by God to be a part of God’s purpose for our world. Mary is blessed.

Mary acknowledges that she is blessed by God, chosen to be a part of God’s redemptive purpose for the world. She connects the dots to Israel’s past – God said he would do this, he would save us, and he has been working toward this...history is salvation history...the working of God toward the redemption of the whole world. Mary’s song lets us know God *is* working toward this ultimate purpose – redemption by God does not mean tolerating our circumstances on earth while we wait for the eternal bliss of the after-life in heaven. God’s redemption is happening on earth – Mary realizes in awe that she is chosen to be a part of that redemption, to live the fulfillment of God’s promise, God’s kingdom come on earth as in heaven and she describes that for us. It is a turning upside-down of the way the world works in the hands of people who do not understand God’s ways.

Mary tells us that God fills the hungry not only with hope, but with food. Rather than being satisfied with *comforting* the lowly, God lifts them up, granting them

dignity and honor, a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation. At the same time, God shows strength by disrupting the world's power structures, dethroning rulers, and humbling the mighty.

Clearly such saving acts are good news for the poor and lowly, but what does Mary's song mean for the wealthy and the powerful? Is there nothing but judgment for them? Though judgment and salvation may seem like opposites, they go hand in hand. Those who stand in awe only of themselves and their own power will be judged. Yet if only the wealthy and powerful can just realize, by bringing them down — by emptying and humbling them — God *is* saving them. When they turn their gaze from themselves and their own accomplishments, when their awe is directed to God — then there is mercy for them, too.

Both in Mary's song and in Jesus' ministry we see the God who *loves* us as we are but does not *leave* us as we are.

When God empties the rich of their excess and fills the hungry with good things, the result is not social reversal — with the powerless and the powerful changing places — it is a social leveling. The rich and powerful are stripped of their arrogance and taught to love their neighbors as they love themselves. Thus God provides for the poor and honors the humiliated. When the arrogant are scattered and the powerful brought down, then every person has access to enough of the world's resources, and no one has too much. Every person is treated with dignity and respect, and no one uses power to harm.

Mary's song magnifies the Savior who loves the whole world with a love that makes creation whole. God's saving judgment is for all of us, bringing us down from the pride that fills us with ourselves, from the pride that blocks out the view

of God and neighbour. God's saving judgement brings us up from the feelings of unworthiness, of not being good enough, that convinces us that no one — not even God — could love us.

Like Mary, we, too, are blessed — invited by God to be a part of the fulfillment of his purpose. Like Mary, our blessing is a cross-shaped blessing, “a condition of complete simplicity (costing not less than everything)” as T. S. Eliot so memorably said, yet bringing true freedom, the priceless gift of God's salvation.

We are blessed — not because we have what we have but because God looks on us in our lowliness. God has chosen us to be a part of God's purpose for the world. Like Mary, who speaks in the present tense, we have been lifted up, we have been filled with good things. And, like Mary, we bear within us the kingdom of God, the fulfillment of God's promise, that will scatter the proud and bring down the powerful. We abide in God as God abides in us. We are one body — Christ's body — for we all share in the one bread that is Christ's body. We show the world how to live as one. We show the world how to live lives rooted in God's love, living lives of inclusivity, compassion, and justice. We push back against all that is wrong in this world, against everything, every attitude that does not belong in God's kingdom. We are the sign of God's kingdom, the foretaste of God's kingdom, and at the same time, the instrument of God's kingdom. We are. But only when we live as such among ourselves.

God waits for our words: “let it be with me according to your word.”