Magnificat! An exploration of the God of Mary’s song?

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Introductory word
Luke 4:17 – 19

17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to [Jesus]. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

We are gathered today in this same Spirit and in the name of this Jesus to encounter God in the text today and to discover something of the God of Mary’s song.

Blessing
Preacher: Congregation of Gamkavallei, grace and peace be unto you from God the Father....

Congregation: There is no end to God’s love and justice.

Preacher: ...and from God the Son...

Congregation: God became human and came to the world to reconcile us with Himself and with each other.

Preacher: ...and with God the Holy Spirit.

Congregation: God is with us, God makes us new.

Introductory remarks
Congregation, we are currently in the time in the church year that is called ‘Kingdom time’, which stretches from Pentecost to right before Advent. The meaning of this time points to the work of the church in the world, in the power of the Spirit. The colour of this time is green and the symbol that is used in this time is of a ship on stormy seas.

Luke 1:46 – 56 is a text that wants to say something about exactly this, about the nature of God’s kingdom, even though this text is prescribed by the lectionary as an Advent text, a text that is usually read in Christmas time. In Luke 1 we encounter the teenage girl Mary, who is visited by the angel Gabriel to be called, in a scene similar to the callings of prophets, to bear God’s Son. It is to this calling that she declares herself willing. The angel also speaks of her cousin Elizabeth’s pregnancy, and Mary travels to her to spend three months with Elizabeth. Our text today follows on the meeting between the two women, wherein Elizabeth praises Mary and the unborn baby John responds to the presence of the unborn baby Jesus. One commentator describes the uniqueness of this moment as “the intertwining of the destinies of the two heroes of Luke’s infancy gospel”. The wonder of such an encounter, a moment in which the hope and blessing of God’s calling overwhelms the two mothers, is the spark with which Mary’s praisegiving is
ignited. The ‘Magnificat’ of Mary, a praisegiving song that follows on this unique encounter, is a well-known text in the church’s traditions and history. We will read it together now in Luke 1:46 – 56.

**Bible reading**

*Mary’s Song (Luke 1:46 – 56)*

46 And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holily 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  
to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
just as he promised our ancestors.”

56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

**Sermon**

Today we encounter Mary, the mother of Jesus, who falls pregnant and gives birth to the one that, we confess, is both fully God and fully human. Mary is a very important figure in the church traditions and practices of especially the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. There she is associated with her virginity and her purity, as an example and with the comfort that her presence brings. She is the *theotokos*, the Godbearer, the mother of God, the eternal virgin. Many songs and practices, throughout the ages, has been fixed to her person and used to honour her, in the spirit of Elizabeth’s praise of Mary. These songs and practices form part of a great tradition of Mary veneration, or Mariology. Earlier this year, our class had a tour through the South Cape to visit different churches and church projects, and somewhere on this tour the figure of Mary had captured my imagination, especially when we spent some time in a chapel in Herolds Bay. The Roman Catholic chapel there is called the Stella Maris, the star of the sea, which is an acknowledged title for Mary in this church tradition. In this chapel there is a painting, which you will see displayed on the screen, by an unknown artist. You will see that Mary is displayed as the one providing direction, the guide through rough and
difficult times. If you look carefully you will see a ship in the background, which is driven on the rocks of temptation by the wild seas. In this painting, Mary, the star of the sea, guides people through the difficult, stormy seas of life. And it is this picture of a ship on rough water, interestingly enough, that serves as symbol for the time in the church year in which we are now: Kingdom time.

Mary is not venerated in the Reformed churches, but followed; she is not understood as fellow saviour with Jesus or as mother of God, but as disciple of Jesus. Still, often we make too little of her, and perhaps we even underestimate the role that she can play as guide to God in our text today. Mary is probably Jesus’ very first disciple, and also the only one of His disciples present at both his birth and his death. Luke does not only write about her in his Gospel, but also in the Acts of the Apostles, where we read of her for the last time in the New Testament. Mary is an important figure for the writer of Luke and Acts, and therefore we also find a praisegiving song, our focus text for today, that is dedicated to her at the beginning of the Gospel.

Mary’s song, that is often called the Magnificat because the Latin translation of the text begins with the words “Magnificat anima mea Dominum”, is the second of four songs found in the Gospel of Luke. The four songs at the beginning of the gospel set the tone of the entire salvation story, as it is told by Luke. Thus we read of Mary’s praisiesong of God, that is called the Magnificat; the song of the angel choir, called the Gloria in Excelsis (2:13 – 14); the thanksgiving song of Zechariah, also known as the Benedictus (1:67 – 79); and the song of Simeon, the Nunc Dimittis (2:28 – 32). The Magnificat, the first of these four songs, has its origin among the Palestinian Jews, among the less educated masses that had little power or money. The Magnificat is deeply embedded in the Jewish tradition and atmosphere, and almost every verse is based on Old Testament parallels. Some even describe Mary’s song as a typical praise psalm. The Magnificat echo motifs from an Israelite context and history, and calls upon the powerful memory of God’s liberation of Israel. The Magnificat is a revolutionary song, in which intense conflict and victory is prevalent. The Magnificat is the great New Testament liberation song, in which personal and social, political and economic liberation is proclaimed.

In Mary’s dangerous song, and through the controversial figure of Mary, we encounter five dangerous thoughts about God. In the Magnificat we are confronted with (1) a God that sees or recognizes human beings, (2) a God that does not leave people alone in their distress, (3) a God that stays true to Himself, and therefore (4) liberates all that live in lack and in dependence on God, and (5) a God that dares to involve Himself in public, political issues.

Luke, like the other Evangelists, tells the story of Jesus’ work of salvation: of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. The Gospel according to Luke, however, also differs from the other three Gospels, because it often tells the selfsame story in different, often surprising, ways. One way in which Luke’s account is surprising, is through the important place that is given to women in the story – Luke is sometimes even called the gospel of women! Women’s voices are not heard often in the Bible, and women’s confessions of who God is are heard even less within the biblical corpus. Mary, then, is the only woman in Luke to whom a full proclamation speech is given. Already at the beginning of Luke we find a song of Mary, in which we find embedded a confession of who God is. We read there of God as the one who truly sees her, with all of her faults and difficulties and limitations. In the movie Avatar one character explains to another that to
see—“I see you”—means “I see into you”, “I understand you”, in the indigenous language of the planet on which they find themselves. So it is when God sees us, too. Mary’s song confesses, firstly, that God is a God that truly sees people.

We read, secondly, in this song of a God that does not leave people alone in their distress and need. The girl that sings the Magnificat is unimportant, poor, and as a pregnant but unmarried young woman she is a marginal figure in her society. Against this stands not only God’s ‘holiness’ and ‘power’, but also God’s salvation work, God’s intervention in the lives of people in need. Mary’s song confesses, against her circumstances, that God is ‘saviour’; that the God that is holy and almighty is at the same time the one concerned about people and their distress. God does not leave people alone—not Mary in her difficult circumstances, and also not Israel when they need God the most. Mary’s song is, above all, a confession of faith, a confession that testifies to God’s involvement in the world and in structures and in people’s lives. In Mary’s song we find the comfort of a young, poor woman, a nobody, who confesses that God stands with the most vulnerable. The comfort of Mary’s confession of faith lies in God identifying with us, in that God stands with us, in that God empowers and comforts us, when we have nothing to offer and when we are oppressed and embarrassed and betrayed. When we lose our faith in people; when our political leaders fail us and our communities are no longer hospitable to those that suffer the most. God chooses us when we are the least.

We read, thirdly, of a God that stays true, that stays faithful, to Himself, and who does nothing less than what He had already done in the history of Israel. One person writes that God is always there as the merciful one, throughout the ages, in every generation, in every new circumstance. God is the one who sees people in their distress, who concerns Himself with them, who reaches out His hand and does mighty deeds to them. The memory of Israel’s liberation from Egypt, and the remembrance of every moment in which God saves Israel from distress, is presupposed in Mary’s song. God stands with Israel and thinks of His concern for them (verse 54), which God had also promised to the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (verse 55). God is faithful because God remembers Himself, because God keeps His promises to the patriarchs and because He does not forget His election of Israel. Because God remembers, Mary is enabled to call upon God’s faithfulness, on God’s inability to forget Himself. Because God stands with the oppressed people Israel, the people in distress, those without protection or hope for liberation from oppression, and because God cannot forget—because of all this, Mary can rely on God’s intervention, both in her personal life (verses 46 to 49) and in the history of Israel (verses 50 to 55).

We read, fourthly, of a God that is unequivocally on the side of the poor and the oppressed. Luke is not only referred to as the gospel of women, but is also called the gospel of the poor. Mary’s song is a liberation song that consists of a number of themes and ideas from Old Testament texts. Luke places Mary in the tradition of Hebrew prophets and singers, which is remarkable, since the image of women in the Old Testament is very diverse. The central image is probably that of wife and mother. Women received their worth and dignity from their husbands, especially in the role of mother of sons. A woman’s security and status was inseparably part of the marriage and of the birth of children (especially of the birth of sons). The greatest shame and tragedy for a woman was, consequently, the inability to bear children. This becomes particularly apparent in the great Old Testament parallel with Mary’s song, namely Hannah’s song in
1 Samuel 2. Hannah’s song, in which we read of an even more radical confession of God’s salvation deeds, is based in the story of a woman that cannot bear children. Hannah’s situation is, however, a familiar one in the Old Testament, and she finds herself in good company: of the matriarchs of Israel – Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel – and even of some others, like Samson’s mother, who could only bring sons into the world through God’s intervention. Mary finds herself, like these women, in a situation where she is exposed to the powers and principalities of her day. Mary’s situation differs from that of Hannah in that her problem is not that she cannot bear children. But Mary, like Hannah, is in an uncomfortable position, because her circumstances are not in line with the social convention of her day. Still both women confess that God is a God of people that are rejected and marginalized. Elizabeth may venerate Mary, but Mary venerates God, and in Mary’s song, through Mary, we come to see a God that stands with those that suffer, the ‘have nots’, the ‘underdogs.’ We read in Mary’s song, like we often read in the Old Testament, of a God that concerns himself with those that are poor and lowly and oppressed.

We read in Mary’s song, lastly, of a God that dares to involve Himself in public issues. In politics. In the economy. We read that God’s work is not limited to that which the church can do/does. This makes our text today a dangerous text. It is dangerous because it dares to raise a very public opinion about public issues that concern our societies to this day: about the division between rich and poor, powerful and weak, important and unimportant. It is dangerous because it is unapologetically biased, on the side of the humble, hungry and poor. It is dangerous because it refuses to keep quiet, and because it cannot be silenced within the Gospel of Luke with interpretations that soften the challenge to those who abuse their power or money. The main theme of Mary’s song is that of social reverse and liberation from systemic injustice; liberation from oppression through political leaders and by those that are arrogant and rich. Still, Mary’s song is also about more than a class struggle. One person writes that the deep mystery of God’s outreaching love for the poor of this world does not fall together with the simple schematization of a class struggle. Rather, Mary’s song takes issue with the fact that Jesus is the friend of unimportant, oppressed people; that God concerns Himself with unimportant, downtrodden people; that God concerns Himself about those that no one else is concerned about; and that the church ought to follow God and Jesus in this.

In Mary’s story we encounter a story that we know well in our community: the drama of a pregnant young girl, a teenager. But exactly in this well-known story a revelation of God is contained; a confession of a God that sees the young girl Mary and who does not abandon her in her distress, in her vulnerability. In Mary’s confession of who God is we see a God that stands with the vulnerable and the marginalized. Mary’s song therefore offers both comfort and challenge; both God’s yes and God’s no for us today. The comfort of God’s proximity is the comfort of a God who would become human and who would be God-with-us. The danger of God’s proximity in human need is the warning of the radical nature of God’s righteousness, of social reversal and the liberation that God brings.

God says yes. God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Israel, is concerned in His full Trinity about us. Therefore we can sing, with Mary, of God’s greatness. In the midst of our pain and suffering, we can also say ‘megalein’! We glorify! ‘Magnificat’! We raise up! Hallelujah! Let God’s name be raised up! But together with this we also realize that God places Himself on the side of those who cannot fend for themselves; we realize,
with Mary, who God is for the whole earth, in His great faithfulness and love, in His own raising up of the poor and their inclusion in His kingdom, in His concern for the hungry, the sick and the weak, and in His focus on the prevailing of justice in every socio-political and economic circumstance. God’s yes is the yes to a life with dignity for all people, in a world in which care is given for those who are the most vulnerable; in a world in which political leaders are not driven by self-gain, but by their responsibility to make our societies and communities and country into a place where a life without violence or oppression is possible.

But God also says no. Mary’s song is politically incorrect, offensive even, and theologically biased. The song moves readers, us today, to choose sides. It does not allow us to walk away from it without dealing with the absurd one sidedness of the text. It does not allow us to continue living in our comfort zones, because it sketches an image of God that is not swallowed easily – especially within the Dutch Reformed Church and even more so in discussions on church unity. It is a song that refuses to remain neutral, and which also does not allow the reader to remain neutral – untouched, unmoved, unchanged – in an encounter with the text. It ought to be an uncomfortable text for us, especially for those in positions of power and status, for those with wealth and possessions, because it confronts us all with our responsibility towards those that are vulnerable and poor. Mary’s song is a liberation song, a song that proclaims freedom and justice and recovery, restoration and reparation, for those that are oppressed and exposed and in need. Mary’s song proclaims the good news of a God that is deeply concerned about people and their needs. Mary’s song is a type of confession of faith, a confession of who God is, but it is also a confession of how the kingdom of God looks. God’s no is the no to unjust structures and to leaders that exploit and exclude those that are poor and vulnerable from decisions that involve them; or deprive them of opportunities for living a more dignified life; or simply neglect their responsibilities toward those without power or status.

Mary’s Magnificat points us to who God is and to what God does in the lives of people, especially those that are vulnerable, powerless, in need. In Mary’s confession of who God is, in hér confession, we therefore do not only find the comfort of God’s closeness, but also the challenge of God’s righteousness; not only the radical claim that is placed on our lives to stand where God stands, but also the comfort that God is the One that has always concerned Himself, throughout the ages, with the poor, the distressed, the humble. The weak. The vulnerable. Those without power, or money, or status. Those without dignity in our communities. When Jesus would preach his first sermon, years later, he would proclaim exactly the same message as Mary’s song earlier. For Jesus, salvation is about exactly this: comfort for the poor, healing for those with pain, liberation for the captives, sight for the blind, freedom for all that are broken. In Luke 4, Jesus’ first sermon is about nothing less than the good news of God’s concern for the humble, the sick, the poor, the oppressed.

The Disney film “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” (1996) tells the story of a disformed bellringer in the Cathedral of Notre Dame in 15th century Paris. But if you watch the film carefully you will see that this children’s story really tells the story of the neverending struggles of gypsies in France – those who were the marginalised in society; who were regarded and treated as poor, low class and even criminal. I play only one song out of this film, where the gypsy heroine Esmeralda sings hér song of praise to Mary and Jesus, in the spirit of Mary’s song of praise to God, in the Cathedral of Notre Dame.
Confession of faith

Let us, as congregation, participate in Mary’s song now and confess with her:

Preacher:  We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit. This God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.

Congregation: We believe that God has revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;

Preacher:  that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow him in this;

that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged;

that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

Congregation: Jesus is Lord.

Preacher:  To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honor and the glory for ever and ever.

Amen.

Benediction

Amen