

Luke 1:39-55

³⁹Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. ⁴⁰She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴²With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. ⁴³Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. ⁴⁵Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

⁴⁶Mary said,

"With all my heart I glorify the
Lord!

⁴⁷In the depths of who I am
I rejoice in God my savior.

⁴⁸He has looked with favor
on the low status of his servant.
Look! From now on, everyone
will consider me highly
favored

⁴⁹because the mighty one
has done great things for
me.

Holy is his name.

⁵⁰He shows mercy to everyone,
from one generation to the
next,
who honors him as God.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm.
He has scattered those with arrogant
thoughts and proud inclinations.

⁵²He has pulled the powerful
down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.

⁵³He has filled the hungry
with good things
and sent the rich away empty-
handed.

⁵⁴He has come to the aid
of his servant Israel,
remembering his mercy,

⁵⁵just as he promised to our
ancestors,
to Abraham and to Abraham's
descendants forever."

Luke 14:1 (CEB)

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to share a meal in the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees, they were watching him closely. . . .

⁷When Jesus noticed how the guests sought out the best seats at the table, he told them a parable. ⁸"When someone invites you to a wedding celebration, don't take your seat in the place of honor. Someone more highly regarded than you could have been invited by your host. ⁹The host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give your seat to this other person.' Embarrassed, you will take your seat in the least important place. ¹⁰Instead, when you receive an invitation, go and sit in the least important place. When your host approaches you, he will say, 'Friend, move up here to a better seat.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. ¹¹All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up."

¹²Then Jesus said to the person who had invited him, "When you host a lunch or dinner, don't invite your friends, your brothers and sisters, your relatives, or rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return and that will be your reward. ¹³Instead, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed because they can't repay you. Instead, you will be repaid when the just are resurrected."

*The Good News upsets many of our cherished beliefs about the how the world works.
Are we truly ready for a world turned upside-down?*

Perhaps it is because I am teaching Luke's gospel in my Tuesday class right now, but when I saw the lectionary passage for this week from Luke 14, the story of Mary, Jesus' mother, came immediately to mind. An overarching theme of the New Testament writers is that the coming of Jesus turned the whole world upside. Victory would be a cross, strength a crown of thorns. And, Luke wants us to grasp that from the beginning of his gospel. To whom is the very Son of God born? A peasant girl from a place so inconsequential as to be nearly unknown. To whom would this birth first be announced? Shepherds, whose place in society was at the very bottom. All this can be

grasped, the stage set, in the song Mary sings when she meets her relative Elizabeth. First, though, some context . . . and, yes, it is Christmas in August!

A shocking announcement

On just a regular sort of day, Mary, a young Galilean peasant, hardly more than a girl, was visited by an angel, Gabriel, no less. At the time, Mary was engaged to a young man named Joseph, which was tantamount to marriage even before the consummation of the union. Gabriel tells Mary that she is favored by God. As I'd guess most of us would be, Mary is perplexed and disquieted, even fearful. But she becomes reflective as she considers what the angel's greeting might mean for her. Gabriel comforts her and then tells her something that makes no sense whatsoever to her.

Mary is going to bear a child, and not just any child, but the "Son of the Most High" who will sit on David's throne. Mary's reflections turn to the immediate question of how this could possibly be. She is a virgin! How could she possibly explain a pregnancy? What would everyone assume, even Joseph? Gabriel tells her that the baby will be born by the power of God.¹ Gabriel then tells Mary that her relative, Elizabeth, is pregnant, even though Elizabeth was very old and had been unable to bear children.

I'm sure that Mary must have found all this too much to comprehend. But Gabriel reminds Mary that "nothing will be impossible with God." Notice that Gabriel uses the future tense, echoing Jesus' later declaration, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:27). A barren woman can have a child. A virgin can conceive. God can come to earth as a child. A person can be resurrected. All of these are incredible claims, but with God, the impossible becomes possible. And these seemingly impossible acts of God happen to and through the most ordinary of people. Yes, God can turn the world upside down! Mary was just a young woman in a small, insignificant town, in an out-of-the-way Roman province. Gabriel didn't visit a queen or a princess; instead, it is the obedient, worshipful response of this pious girl that enables God's story to move forward.

Mary is also told that her baby's name is to be Jesus. "Jesus" is simply the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Yeshua (Joshua), meaning "Yahweh [God's name] is salvation." Matthew tells us that the baby is to bear this name because "he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

The name, Yeshua, was a very ordinary name in Jesus' day but, of course, given here to a most extraordinary person. The angel Gabriel tells Mary that Jesus will be called "the Son of the Most High," a striking title, and that he will sit on David's throne, where he will reign over God's people (the "House of Jacob") forever. Indeed, Jesus' "kingdom will have no end." All this is in keeping with promises God had made to King David nearly 1000 years before. Jesus, this baby to be born to Mary, is the promised but long-awaited Jewish Messiah, who would usher in God's kingdom on earth.

I would imagine that all this was quite frightful for Mary. There's a reason that the first words out of almost every angel's mouth in the Bible are "Don't be afraid." Fear tested Mary's faith and fears test our faith. Turning the world upside down is in many ways a frightening prospect for all of us, at least if we feel comfortable and secure in our lives.

The question is whether we will hold tight to God and to our confidence that we are his, the sheep of his pasture. Faith is no guarantee of an easy or worry-free life; God has made us no such promise. Indeed, in many ways choosing faith is choosing a hard path. But it *is* faith for which we have been made, a people created in God's image who are to know God and enjoy God forever. And it is in the lived faith of disciples that we can find the peace that passes all understanding and the confidence that one day God's mercy, justice, and healing will transform our world and each of us. Let us be more like

¹ The words "come over" (v. 35) translate the Greek, *episkiazo*, and carries the sense of God's holy presence, as in the cloud that "covered" the tabernacle (Exodus 40:35).

Mary, who in the face of frightful perplexity, simply said, “Let it be with me just as you have said.” (Luke 1:38). No more faith-filled words are spoken in all the Bible.

Mary visits Elizabeth

So, sometime thereafter Mary went to visit Elizabeth in her home. One woman is old but now pregnant, long after giving up hope for a child (see Luke’s opening story in his gospel). The other is young and unmarried, but now pregnant and carrying the hope of Israel. Joy floods the room. At the mere sound of Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s baby leaps in her womb. Elizabeth herself is nearly overcome with the power of it all . . . she knows that Mary is the mother of her Lord. This story invites us to look back on our own lives and find those moments when we were flooded by joy and excitement that seemed to overwhelm, which seemed impossible to contain. Surely, Elizabeth and Mary experience that and more. Mary is so thrilled, so excited, that she breaks out into verse (v. 46-55). (You might pause for a moment and read her song in its entirety.)

Mary’s Song

As you may know, Patti and I took a group to Israel in 2014 and will do so again this fall. We will spend another ten amazing days with more than ninety members of the St. Andrew family. On the last day of our trip, we will visit the village of Ein-Kerem in the Judean hills east of Jerusalem. In Christian tradition, this village was the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist. Thus, it is remembered as the place where Mary visited Elizabeth. One of the town’s landmarks is even known as Mary’s Spring. High on the slopes of Ein-Kerem sit two churches, both known as the Church of St. John the Baptist. One is Orthodox and the other is Roman Catholic. We will visit the Roman Catholic church. Outside on a long wall, are nearly 60 ceramic plaques, each from around the world in various languages. Each plaque has the words of Mary’s song. It is a very moving sight – indeed, across the world we are one in Christ Jesus!

These verses from Mary tell us all we really need to know about the vocation that will be given her unborn child, about the world he will turn upside, about the paradox of the cross. Culpepper writes:

Verse 48 declares the reason for Mary’s praise and identifies her with the lowly, foreshadowing both the promise of exaltation of the lowly later in the Magnificat and the fulfillment of this promise in the ministry of Jesus. The words of praise, however, speak of God’s redeeming work not as future but as already having been fulfilled. Such is the confidence of faith. The overthrow of the powerful has not come about through the mounting up of the weak in rebellion but through the coming of God in the weakness of a child. The couplets describe the dramatic reversal that is the signature of God’s mighty acts. The proud are scattered. The powerful are deposed. By contrast, the lowly are exalted and the hungry are fed while the rich are sent away empty. According to the promises, the Lord has helped Israel to remember God’s mercies. More than predictions of what is to come, the Magnificat praises God for the goodness of God’s nature and the redemption that Israel and the church have experienced. The Magnificat also makes clear the pattern of God’s activity. In every line there are echoes of the Scriptures of Israel.²

And so we come to Jesus’ brief teaching – those who lift themselves up will be brought low and the lowly will, in this great reversal, will be lifted up. This is a call to humility but it is more. It sets forth God’s wish for his creation, a wish that we so often fail to fulfill. God’s creation is built on foundations of self-sacrifice not self-interest and humility not self-promotion. May we be people who live this out every single day in every single place . . . no exceptions.

² Culpepper, R. A. (1994–2004). The Gospel of Luke. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 9, p. 55). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What evidence do you see that God has turned the world upside down in Jesus? Is it really about the future, what will happen? Or can you find examples now of a “great reversal?”
2. Jesus was born in the humblest of circumstances and would, one day, be humiliated on a cross. Now, being humble . . . that is a word I can deal with. I have a much harder time with “humiliated.” Being humble just seems so Christian and such a nice thing to be. (I guess I could even take pride in my humbleness!??) You might begin by discussing your own reaction to being “humble” v. being “humiliated.” Perhaps the difference is this. Being humble is something I can try to do for myself. Being humiliated is something done to me by others. Jesus was both humble and humiliated. He took the form of a slave upon himself. The humiliation of the cross was inflicted on him by others. Have there ever been times in your own life when you were humiliated for the benefit of others? Were you humiliated willingly? How did it make you feel? Why is it so hard for us?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Luke 4:14-21 What does the passage from Isaiah chosen by Jesus have in common with Mary’s song?	Tuesday, Luke 16: 14-31 A parable of the great reversal?
Wednesday, Luke 18:9-14 Who lifts himself and who is lifted up by God?	Thursday, Philippians 2:5-11 Setting aside our self-interest
Friday, Psalm 51 A prayer for a clean heart, a humble heart	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle’s Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We will begin Genesis on Sep 12

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

NOTE: These two classes are on hiatus and should resume the week of September 11.

Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Scott’s Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to “worship” and then “sermons.” You’ll find the study with each week’s recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org