

“Whatever Your Lot”

1 Samuel 2:1-10; Luke 1:46-55

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“And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me (Luke 1:46-49).”

June, 1999: The Dominican Republic. A group of 30 privileged youth from the northeast land in Santo Domingo and are taxied to one of the poorest of the nearby *suburbs*. They make their way down dusty streets and dirtied off-road paths until they arrive at a compound encompassed by unforgiving barbed-wire. The compound is a school. Around the school, beyond the barb-wire, are homes (if you could call them that) made of concrete, maybe 30-40 feet in diameter. Windows are merely openings carved into the wall, and the front door a larger opening. The ground is covered with people sitting in tattered clothes with feet for shoes in a suspended cloud of debris. In a word, shell-shocked, the northeastern youth find themselves in a world completely unknown to their eyes and minds, something beyond recognition or comprehension, something more like the work of fiction. And yet, for the inhabitants of this particular village beyond the city lines of Santo Domingo, this is reality and everyday life.

The youth’s mission work starts on a Sunday morning, an appropriate day and time perhaps, and they begin to fortify the walls of the school and stay at the job through the afternoon. In the early evening, they walk into the village to conduct what they hope to be a brief yet inspiring rendition of a Biblical narrative for any of the locals hanging around, which happens to be most of them. And by the days end they are utterly spent, both from the labor of their work and the taxing of their emotional reserve as they try to deal with the unconscionable levels of poverty that surround them from all sides.

Monday brings about much of the same, though when they go to sleep at night, a slight tremor of something unknown begins to be heard within each and every one of them, something they can feel more than they can hear. It’s something the apparitions of their Sunday selves would have never noticed, but it has now begun and will only continue to amplify. It becomes more audible on Tuesday and Wednesday, but doesn’t really manifest into something discernable until the end of the week, on the last day before they are to leave. And it is when they share their last supper together over individual stories and a collective recounting of their experiences, that the volume is unmatched by any other thought or sound, and that which has been growing inside of them for the past week is finally recognized as Mary’s song of old, which had been perpetually personifying itself through the lives of those in the village who they were witnessing to.

And maybe it was for the better that it happened that way, on the last day, for its impact was more immediate as we (yes, we, myself and my peers) returned home to our white houses and picket fenced neighborhoods. It was something that changed us, something that stayed with us, something that we still talk of and even write sermons about. For in that tiny little village of dust, disease and decrepitude, we/I heard Mary’s song for the first real time and through it, discovered the spark of life.

A spark, mind you, that can’t just be found anywhere. A spark that hardly burns in places and towns such as ours. A spark that is so rare that it is ever so treasured when you do find it. This spark of life, this Holiest of Spirits that danced in these people’s souls, it closed their eyes to the nature of their surroundings and opened their vision to a Kingdom only few have ever truly seen. These people who had naught by chaos and lifelessness around them had somehow found radiances in their beings that shined just so much brighter than ours, we who came from privilege and the aesthetic beauty of our community.

No doubt this was due to Mary, and also to Hannah, whose song and prayer respectively were so personally alive in these people. For in the same manner that those women and their audiences were poor and yet exalted God for all that was done in their lives, these people, who resided in one of most impoverished villages imaginable, only spoke to us of how thankful they were. Which was just astonishing, and even more so because they viewed their lives as gifts anointed by God. A gift, they called it. Can you imagine? They told us in our conversations with them that *they* felt blessed. We almost raised our eyebrows in the beginning as if to say, “you call all this a blessing?” But no matter what illness or evil awaited them at the next corner or day, whatever was their lot, they remained either ignorant or indifferent and cared not at all, at least for the nonce we were with them. For all that they allowed us to see in them was this spark of life; this happiness simply to

be alive; this Spirit to live in and by grace; this subtle yet profound appreciation and for all that they had, no matter how little and lacking of all we could have perceived it to be. It was all so hardly believable and I believe now that's precisely what made it so special.

Wouldn't it be great if we too shared that spark? If we refused to let the petty things of our comfortable routines get under our skin? If we looked around and saw just how amazing life is and just how thankful we should be? Why do *civilized* Christians fail at this so greatly? Well, according to scripture, the difficult answer, at least for you and I and people of our standing, is because we are rich in our material possessions. That because we are exactly unlike Hannah, Mary, or the people outside of Santo Domingo, we are unable to see how they see, to pray how they pray, to sing how they sing, to live how they live. That since most of us abide in places of wealth and stature, which they did not, we often live through and for the objects that come from both, while they lived simply in gratitude for the mere breath that inhaled and exhaled throughout their being, which was often all that they had.

If only then we could put aside all that we have, doing just as much as our Christ taught us. Maybe that's why there are so many Biblical texts such as ours from this morning that speak out against the rich while uplifting the poor. Maybe it is true that it is easier for a camel to go through an eye of the needle than a rich person to enter the Kingdom. Maybe it really is about us laying down our trophies so that we can exchange them one day for a crown.

Mary sings that God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly (Luke 1:52). Now on the surface, this appears only to continue the Biblical antagonism toward those of the upper class, but several theological commentaries actually argue otherwise, saying that this is God actually working on behalf instead of against the rich. That God is not hateful of those who find wealth, just that God wishes for all to be redeemed, and that the only way for this to occur is to have those who are in the minority of possession become like the majority who are devoid of means. And mind you, this is but a reverberation of the Divine message across religions, for we also learn from the Buddhist tradition that Siddhartha Gautama, a prince for which the entire world was provided, made forfeit all of his possessions so that he could follow the Middle Way of life, and in doing so was awakened and eventually lifted up as the Buddha.

Of course, we need not look toward other traditions for this understanding, as Jesus, our Christ, crystallizes the point. For the Son of God, the King of Kings, the Author of Salvation, the Heir of God's Creation... indeed, the Bread of Life gave up his stature at the right hand of the Almighty to live amongst us and as the earthly son of an artisan – a rank hardly better than that of a slave. Jesus humbled his glory to such an extent that he went to a wooden cross and died upon it for our mortal sake. But died he didn't, for by God, he was raised. And we are told through Hannah and Mary that such will be the same majestic fate for those who do struggle, for those who are poor, for those who live bound by simple gratitude marked by the spark of life. Truly I tell you then, it is not until we bring ourselves down from our pedestals, from our man-made thrones of position and power, that we will enter the Kingdom and see the Divine all around us, bearing witness to creation and appreciating it for all that it is, whatever its lot may be.

All of that said it is not this sermon's contention that we ought to run from these church doors this morning throwing all of our possessions to the ground, returning home so to give away all that we have paid high prices for and worked hard at achieving. That would be both unrealistic and something I think unnecessary. For even Hannah in her prayer acknowledges that God in divine omniscience and with purpose has made princes of riches. But, if we are to be descendants and followers of the Biblical tradition and narrative, then we must agree that we are called to at least see, pray and live as Hannah, Mary, and those special people outside of Santo Domingo did. To look at life as through the eyes of them, as a pauper, to become humble in our dealings and thankful even for the basest of things that come our way, namely and simply the divine gift of our breath.

My friends, it is simple. Put aside all that which gets in the way of true living.

Breathe. Simplify. And cherish.

Amen.