

## Mary: The Ideal Disciple<sup>1</sup>

There are two momentous insights enshrined in this sparkling hymn of praise sung by Jesus' mother, Mary. But first, a bit of background. Mary has been visited by the Angel Gabriel and has agreed to be the mother of the Messiah. She has traveled to visit her cousin, Elizabeth in a distant town. It is in the presence of Elizabeth that Mary bursts out with this hymn of praise.

The first insight is that in these words, Mary gives us a perfect example of how to receive Christ. Most of us are accustomed to hearing evangelists and Christian friends telling us that we must be born again; that we must accept or receive Jesus Christ as our savior in order for us to be freed of our sins and secure in our relationship with God. What we have in Mary is a perfect example of what receiving Christ means. Above all it means surrendering something in our own lives in order that Jesus may enter the world. In Mary's case she surrendered her plans as a young Jewish woman. She surrendered her reputation and her safety in agreeing to a pregnancy without being married to her intended spouse, Joseph. She made her body available. Mary made available her hard work. All of us know

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on December 19, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA. Additional sermons and other information about First Presbyterian Church may be found at [www.fpclagrange.org](http://www.fpclagrange.org)

how much work a baby is. There's feeding and diapering and getting up in the night and worrying when the baby is sick.

Of course, there's going to be only one birthing mother of Jesus. But Mary serves as a perfect example of what it means to say "Yes," to God and to have Jesus dwell within us. Like Mary we also need to be humble and to give up total control of the course of our lives. We need to change our mind about our priorities. We need to welcome Jesus into our private inner being where all our personal garbage is stored—wicked thoughts, bad memories, schemes of retaliation, unwholesome cravings and so on.

I'm struck by the phrase here: "God has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, all generations will call me blessed." We know that Mary's fame and timeless popularity is utterly true. Mary didn't graduate summa cum laude and go on to Yale and hold high office. Mary found that just humbling herself in order to receive Christ mysteriously gave her tremendous status. God lifted Mary into a state of renown that will never fade.

Many Christians have found it useful to venerate Mary as the queen of the saints. I think that that is appropriate. Mary pioneers the way that every man and woman can follow. To the degree that you and I can set ourselves aside and simply say

"yes" to God and to welcome Jesus into our lives, that is the degree that he will dwell in us and give our lives dignity and significance. That's the first deep insight in these words.

The second is that the wonderful work that God does in Mary's life is paralleled by what God is doing for the whole creation. This gets very lofty and very wonderful. Hidden in Mary's blessedness or joy, is a glimpse of what God is doing for the whole world. The words of Mary's song describe an unfolding reversal of fortunes. "He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree." The structure of society, the entrenched setup of the ones who are manipulating wealth and influence and those who are insignificant cogs in the big wheel, is disrupted. The coming of Jesus into the world spells criticism and a dismantlement of the social structure that locks people in bondage and poverty.

I have been doing a bit of study on the situation in Eastern Kentucky these days. What has drawn my attention to that coal mining, mountainous region is the fact that Eastern Kentucky is also known as the "painkiller capital of America." There is more per person use and abuse of prescription pain killers in that part of Appalachia than anywhere else in the country. I'm asking myself, "Why would this be?" And when you begin to look at the social and economic data for Kentucky a

discouraging picture emerges. Almost every social measurement reveals trouble. Low income, high school dropout rates, more business failures, political corruption, greater rates of disease, fewer doctors. On and on go the numbers that locate Eastern Kentucky close to the bottom of the economic and social heap.

Now I'm talking about this region of Kentucky to illustrate something that is true everywhere. I could be talking about LaGrange or Detroit. But, returning to Kentucky, there are positives. For example, there is enormous wealth in the coal of that region. There is wonderful beauty in the mountains. So why the difficulties? I can't say. What I can say is that there is some mysterious power, something more complex and deep than I can understand, that conspires to keep people in Eastern Kentucky dispirited and not flourishing in any way. It's the power that underlies political corruption and the alienation of the people from the wealth of their own region.

Here's where I'm going with this. The coming of Jesus Christ into the world holds in it the beginnings of the disruption of that mysterious power. Some version of the "system" that bedevils Kentucky is in place everywhere. And when Mary says, "He has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones,

and exalted those of low degree," she is signaling that there is a movement of God afoot that exposes, criticizes, disrupts, and eventually will destroy the dominion system of that power.

Mary understood this. So did Herod. And he was part of the problem back then. Herod and all Jerusalem we're told immediately conspired to eliminate Jesus. Why? Because they knew instinctively that their game was over if God were allowed to reign in this world.

If someone decided to skip this service and listen to the Christmas music at 8:30 a.m. asks what the preacher talked about at 11:00 a.m., here's your quick answer. What God is doing for us by lifting us out of sin and death, God is also doing for the whole world. It's a huge vision. As with Mary, what you and I know of God's work in our own lives, is a sampling of what God is doing for all peoples and all communities.

Next time you're shopping and you see one of the Salvation Army bell ringers and collection kettle, think of the founders of the Salvation Army, William and Catherine Booth. William Booth was a product of grinding urban poverty in 19<sup>th</sup> century Industrial Revolution England. He had a hard-scrabble childhood and apprenticed as a pawnbroker. But at age 15 William Booth received Christ. Instead of becoming a trade union leader, he became an evangelist. His marriage to Catherine Mumford gave

him fresh direction and in 1878, after an unsuccessful attempt to be a Methodist preacher, the Booths launched the Salvation Army. Even to this day, the Salvation Army is on the forefront of providing ministry for the victims of urban poverty worldwide.

That's the pattern we see in Mary! What starts by the quiet personal whisper, "Yes, Lord, come into my life," works its way out towards the transformation of the world. Think of every person you can remember who has received Jesus Christ. There's always a world changing power at work in that life. The Apostle Paul, Constantine, Augustine, Blaise Pascal, George Fox, John Bunyan, John Newton, David Livingstone, Leo Tolstoy, Evelyn Underhill, Albert Schweitzer, C. S. Lewis, Charles Colson.

Mary started it. "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." You and I can say that. You and I can receive Jesus Christ. And in that "yes" begins the great uprising that will one day overturn the reign of evil in all of creation.