

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – December 23, 2018

[Luke 1:46b-55](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Luke 1:46b-55 (From *Homiletics*; “The Stuff Crisis”, December 12, 2010)

Mary offered her hymn of praise, the Magnificat, while she was visiting her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45). According to Luke, two noteworthy events preceded Mary’s homage. The initial event was “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb” (Luke 1:41a). Then, sometime during the visit, “Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” and blessed Mary as “the mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:41b, 43). After Mary listened to Elizabeth’s tribute, the gospel of Luke recites Mary’s celebrated song, which is a blending together or assemblage of several Old Testament passages and themes, including many from the Psalms.

Of all the OT allusions that scholars have identified in the Magnificat, the most obvious reference is to Hannah’s song, found in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 after Samuel’s birth. The link is especially noticeable in the opening lines, as Mary extols God: “My soul magnifies the Lord, / and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (v. 46b-47; cf. 1 Samuel 2:1). But whereas Hannah was rejoicing because she was no longer barren and because the Lord had vindicated her and granted her a personal victory over her rival, Mary is celebrating because the Lord had chosen her, a lowly servant, to bear “the Son of the Most High” (v. 48a; Luke 1:32).

After recognizing her privileged place, Mary declares, “Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; / for the Mighty One has done great things for me, / and holy is his name” (vv. 48b-49). The appellation “Mighty One” is common in the OT and frequently associated with Jacob (e.g., Genesis 49:24; Psalm 132:2, 5; Isaiah 49:26; 60:16). Although the expression “holy is his name” is somewhat atypical when referring to God’s holiness, to speak of “his holy name” is not (e.g., 1 Chronicles 16:10; Psalms 30:4; 33:21; 97:12; 103:1; 105:3; 145:21). It’s also important to note that Mary’s declaration reiterates Elizabeth’s blessing: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb . . . And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord” (Luke 1:42, 45).

As the first half of the Magnificat concludes (vv. 46b-50), Mary’s adoration ascends higher and higher as she sings of God’s inestimable mercy. She extols God not only for the kindness he has shown to her but also for the compassion he will show to all who call on his name. Her poetic adulation makes it clear that both she and her listeners are recipients of God’s grace. Every believer throughout all time is enveloped by his glory; thus Mary exclaims, “His mercy is for those who fear him / from generation to generation” (v. 50).

The next portion of Mary's hymn describes how "the Mighty One" has acted on behalf of the oppressed. In characteristic Lukan reversal theology, God "has shown strength with his arm; / he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. / He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, / and lifted up the lowly" (vv. 51-52). Although Mary's rehearsal of God's mighty deeds isn't a word-for-word recital of 1 Samuel 2, the theme of reversal — of bringing down the haughty and lifting up the downtrodden — is obvious and corresponds well to Hannah's song. Hannah avowed, "Talk no more so very proudly, / let not arrogance come from your mouth; / for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by his actions are weighed" (1 Samuel 2:3).

Another prominent feature is that Hannah's song includes a number of military metaphors (e.g., "The bows of the mighty are broken" and "He will guard the feet . . . for not by might does one prevail," 1 Samuel 2:4a, 9) and violent imagery (e.g., "The Lord kills . . ." "the wicked shall be cut off" and "His adversaries shall be shattered," 1 Samuel 2:6a, 9b, 10). Conversely, such expressions are infrequent in the Magnificat and are more muted when they occur (e.g., "he has scattered the proud . . ." and "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones," vv. 51-52).

Both Hannah's song and the Magnificat similarly esteem God for acting on behalf of the poor and hungry. However, the presentation of the reversal of fortunes for the rich and the poor is much longer and more dramatic in Hannah's song. With vivid and expressive poetry, she declared, "Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, / but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. . . . The Lord makes poor and makes rich; / he brings low, he also exalts. / He raises up the poor from the dust; / he lifts the needy from the ash heap, / to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor" (1 Samuel 2:5a, 7-8a). Although this same theme about the rich and the poor is woven into the *Magnificat*, it's less dramatic. Mary's adulation is much shorter; she simply declares, "[H]e has filled the hungry with good things, / and sent the rich away empty" (v. 53).

The Magnificat closes with Mary turning to address national Jewish interests. The final lines of her canticle recall God's promise to Israel's ancestors and praise him again for his mercy. Appropriately, Mary declares, "He has helped his servant Israel, / in remembrance of his mercy, / according to the promise he made to our ancestors, / to Abraham and to his descendants forever" (vv. 54-55).

Hannah's song echoes a similar nationalistic theme as it ends. However, in contrast to the Magnificat, which speaks of God's promise to Abraham and his descendants, Hannah's song is more militaristic in tone and centers on God's actions on behalf of his king: "The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; / he will give strength to his king, / and exalt the power of his anointed" (1 Samuel 2:10b).

As indicated throughout this commentary, the Magnificat relied on Hannah's song in a number of ways. But the dependence wasn't an automaton-like copy-and-paste methodology. Instead, Luke reworked Hannah's song and adapted it to emphasize God's mercy and favor — themes that reappear throughout the third gospel (e.g., Luke 1:25, 30, 58, 68, 72, 78; 2:40, 52; 4:19; 7:16; 10:37; 16:24; 17:13; 18:38-39). (For an extensive discussion on Mary's visit with Elizabeth and the *Magnificat*, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* [ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1993], 330-66.)

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on Luke 1:46b-55:

- 1.** As noted in the commentary above, Mary's Magnificat has significant parallels with Hannah's Song following the birth of Samuel (1st Samuel 2:1-10). If you haven't done so already, try reading these two exultations side by side. What similarities and differences do you note? What might you make of them? Do these parallels suggest some parallels in the lives of Samuel and Jesus?
- 2.** Would you consider Mary "blessed" (v. 48b)? What if, instead of Mary, it was you / your daughter / your sister /etc? What does it really mean to be "blessed"? During this time of year, when we talk much about the "blessings" of family, friends, traditions, etc, does the Magnificat give you a different slant on what it means to be "blessed"?
- 3.** As with many texts that feature such promises of social "reversal," – i.e. the proud and powerful being brought down a few pegs while the poor and humble are lifted up and given priority (vv. 52-53) – it is easy to hear the good news for the poor and downcast. But for those of us who are wealthy and relatively powerful...is such a reversal bad news? What do we make of this promise when we have been "blessed" with the good things in life?

What questions do you have?

What do you "wonder" about when reading these passages?