

“I Will Build Me a Nest on the Greatness of God”

Luke 1:46-56; Acts 10:44-46a ¹

You may remember that Jill and I both grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, and you may know that I left active duty in the Navy on a pier in Savannah in the fall of 1975. We have a timeshare on Hilton Head Island, up the coast from Savannah (I'll give you a good deal on it, if you're interested), and one of the other famous islands in that vicinity is Jekyll Island, south of Savannah in Glynn County, Georgia.

One of my best friends has recently retired to Jekyll Island, and Glynn County is also known for St. Simons Island and Sea Island. Today's *PowerPoint* background is a picture of “the marshes of Glynn,” taken by another friend of mine.²

If you were from Georgia, the phrase, “the marshes of Glynn,” would likely remind you of a famous poem by that name, written by Georgia poet, Sydney Lanier. The most famous lines of that poem go like this:

As the marsh-hen secretly builds on the watery sod,
Behold I will build me a nest on the greatness of God:
I will fly in the greatness of God as the marsh-hen flies
In the freedom that fills all the space 'twixt the marsh and the skies:
By so many roots as the marsh-grass sends in the sod
I will heartily lay me a-hold on the greatness of God.³

I've been interested to discover that current bird taxonomy knows nothing of a “marsh-hen.” The bird of which Lanier spoke is now known as a *Clapper Rail*. I think I like marsh-hen better; and on this second Sunday of Advent, I invite you to ponder with me the matter of “building a nest on the greatness of God.”

My morning sermons during Advent this year are focusing on “songs” of one sort and another. Last week, we considered “The Servant Songs” from Isaiah. This morning, we'll look at Mary's Song; and next week, we'll think about Zechariah's Song. But to get to these last two “songs” or poems, we have to work into them a bit.

Our text today is from the Gospel of Luke. Luke was Paul's personal physician, and he accompanied Paul on several of his missionary journeys and imprisonments. He would have had ample opportunity to know and to learn from many of the major figures in the early Church; and, unlike Matthew, who wrote primarily for a Jewish audience, Luke wrote for us who are Gentiles.

Only Luke and Matthew gave us narratives about Jesus' birth; and, while Matthew traced Jesus' genealogy back to Abraham, the founder of what would become the Hebrew people, Luke traced Jesus' genealogy all the way back to Adam, the founder of the human race itself.⁴

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 10, 2017. **The second Sunday of Advent.**

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Luke,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953); Vinson, Richard, “Luke,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008); Bock, Darrell, “Luke,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); “Luke,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Leifeld, Walter, “Luke,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Craddock, Fred, “Luke,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version; Nolland, John, “Luke,” *Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1989).

² Dwight Moody is the first friend, and Bruce Gourley is the second.

³ Sidney Lanier (1842-1881), *The Marshes of Glynn*.

⁴ **At least the following twelve items are attested to by both infancy narratives:**

Luke was also the only Gentile—the only non-Jew—to compose a document that ended up in the New Testament, and only he recorded Mary’s Song.

Luke’s birth narrative begins with the angel Gabriel’s announcement of the coming miraculous birth of John the Baptist, who would be the forerunner of the Messiah (Luke 1:5-25); and only Luke tells us that John’s parents were Zechariah and Elizabeth, both descended from the line of Aaron, brother of Moses and Israel’s first High Priest.

Luke made it clear that Zechariah and Elizabeth were a couple of whom it might be truly said, “As the marsh-hen secretly builds on the watery sod, behold, I will build me a nest on the greatness of God.” Luke emphasized how righteousness and godly Zechariah and Elizabeth were, and he told us of their sorrow that they had reached old age without children.

As we consider what is about to happen, it’s important to know that because every descendant of Aaron was automatically a priest, there were far too many priests for the work to be done, and many priests went their whole lives without being able to perform some of the more important priestly functions. The most desirable of these functions was to offer the evening incense in the Temple, after which the priest was able to offer God’s blessing to the people.

Sometime in the early spring of the year 3 B.C., Zechariah was chosen for this honor; and Gabriel appeared to Zechariah while he was alone in the Temple to announce that he and Elizabeth were going to have a son in their old age. This son would be named John, and he would be a holy Nazirite as Samson had been (Numbers 6:1-8; Judges 13:7). John would be filled with God’s Holy Spirit while still in his mother’s womb, and he would be the forerunner of God’s Messiah whom Malachi had prophesied (Malachi 4:6).

Zechariah found himself unable to believe this good news, and as a consequence, he became unable to speak until the baby was born—which meant that he was unable to pronounce blessing over the people that night as he had hoped. But sure enough, just as the angel had promised, Elizabeth soon conceived, and when she was in her sixth month, Gabriel appeared to a young woman named Mary in the northern village of Nazareth to tell her that she was to become the mother of Messiah Himself.⁵

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- i. Jesus’ birth is related to the reign of Herod (Luke 1:5; Matthew 2:1);
 - ii. Mary is a virgin engaged to Joseph, but they have not yet begun to live together (Luke 1:27, 34; 2:5; Matthew 1:18);
 - iii. Joseph is of Davidic descent (Luke 1:27; 2:4; Matthew 1:16, 20);
 - iv. The coming birth is angelically announced (Luke 1:28-30; Matthew 1:20-21);
 - v. Jesus is understood to be a son of David (Luke 1:32; Matthew 1:1);
 - vi. His conception is through the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35; Matthew 1:18, 20);
 - vii. Joseph plays no part in the conception (Luke 1:35; Matthew 1:18-25);
 - viii. The name “Jesus” is divinely provided (Luke 1:31; Matthew 1:21);
 - ix. An angel speaks of Jesus as “Savior” (Luke 2:11; Matthew 1:21);
 - x. Jesus is born after Mary and Joseph have come to live together (Luke 2:4-7; Matthew 1:24-25);
 - xi. Jesus is born in Bethlehem (Luke 2:4-7; Matthew 2:1);
 - xii. Jesus’ family settle in Nazareth in Galilee (Luke 2:39, 51; Matthew 2:22-23).

⁵ **Ways in which the second annunciation surpassed the first:**

- i. the first is in response to prayer; the second is entirely by the initiative of God;
- ii. conception by the barren and aged is a wonder of God, but has OT precedents; conception by a virgin is an unheard-of wonder;
- iii. Zechariah is greeted by name; but Mary is greeted with the awesome “Rejoice, favored one, the Lord is with you”;
- iv. John will be great before the Lord; but Jesus’ greatness knows no qualification;

We don't really know a great deal about Mary.⁶ The truth of the matter is that we know almost nothing beyond the fact that she was betrothed to a carpenter named Joseph, also from Nazareth, and we know from Matthew that Joseph was a descendant of King David, from whom Messiah would come.

As I'm sure you know, marriage customs in those days differed from our own. Young women typically became betrothed, or promised, to their future husbands about the time of puberty, with marriage coming a year or two later. This means that Mary was probably in her early teen years and that she was still a virgin, since her marriage to Joseph was still in the future.

While we don't know the names of Mary's parents, I think we can safely presume that her parents loved the Lord and taught her about God's faithfulness to Israel across the centuries, including the expectation of a coming Messiah. Had this not been the case, Mary would probably have written off her encounter with the angel Gabriel as a hallucination, and she would have been extremely unlikely to have agreed to cooperate with God in the unique way Gabriel proposed. Using today's metaphor, I think the evidence is that Mary, too, was one who could say, "As the marsh-hen secretly builds on the watery sod, behold, I will build me a nest on the greatness of God."

Well, as you know, Gabriel's proposal was weird, indeed. After startling Mary and greeting her as one who had "found favor" with God,⁷ Gabriel told her, "*You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end*" (Luke 1:31-33).

Mary asked, "*How can this be, since I have not had sexual relations with a man?*"

And Gabriel replied, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God*" (Luke 1:34-35).

This unusual statement affirms what we generally call "the virgin birth," and we need to think about that for a moment before we move on. While Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a miracle son via normal human intimacy, Mary's Son would be conceived in a different, unique, way.⁸

Although there were numerous stories in those days about gods having children with human women (cp. Genesis 6:1-4), there were no stories about "virgin births" either among the

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- v. John is consecrated to Nazirite abstinence; Jesus' holiness extends to the very basis of his existence;
 - vi. John will be preparer; but Jesus will be Son and King forever;
 - vii. John will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in the womb; but Jesus' human existence is due entirely to the activity of the Spirit;
 - viii. Zechariah could not believe the angelic announcement; Mary declared herself ready for God's declared purpose.

⁶ What we know about Mary: Matthew 1:18, 20, 2:11, 13:55; Mark 6:3; Luke 1:27, 30, 38-39, 46, 56, 2:5, 16, 19, 34, 19:25; Acts 1:14.

⁷ The only other people I can find who were so called were Noah (Genesis 6:8) and David (Acts 7:46).

⁸ Scholars have concluded that there is no substantial reason for rejecting the conclusion that belief in the virgin birth of Jesus preceded the Gospel accounts, even though no reference to the virgin birth appears in the New Testament outside these two birth narratives. The apologetic of the early Church centered on Jesus' death and Resurrection, not on His birth.

Jews or among the pagans of the time, and Luke was very careful to avoid any language that might suggest any kind of sexuality with which we are familiar.

The word Luke used for “overshadow” (επισκιαζω) denotes the holy, powerful presence of God, such as the cloud that covered the Tabernacle in the wilderness (Exodus 40:35; cf. Psalm 91:4). This is the word used in the accounts of the Transfiguration to describe the overshadowing of the cloud of God’s presence on Mt. Hermon as Jesus met with Moses and Elijah (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34).

What Gabriel announced was a new act of creation rather than a new act of conception as we normally understand it.⁹ After all, how hard would it be for the God who spoke everything that is into existence with one Word of Command, *to change one cell?*¹⁰

While there may be no great theological challenge to the idea of a virgin birth, can you imagine trying to explain the matter to your parents . . . or to your husband-to-be? Though the problems would be huge and immediate, because Mary had “built her nest on the greatness of God,” she did not hesitate: “*I am the Lord’s servant,*” she said. “*May it be done to me according to your word*” (Luke 1:38).

Perhaps to buy time while they and Joseph sorted out what to do about this enormous complication, Mary’s parents allowed her to make the three-day journey south to visit Elizabeth, whom the angel had said was also miraculously pregnant. When Mary came to her door, Elizabeth’s baby, John, leaped in her womb, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. “*Blessed are you among women,*” she exclaimed, “*and your child will be blessed! How could this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill what he has spoken to her!*” (Luke 1:42-43).

It is at this point that Mary’s Song, sometimes called the *Magnificat*, appears. The feeling in this part of the story begins to be somewhat like what we think of as a “musical.” Characters begin to burst into song from time to time, as though this were *The Sound of Music*.

Mary’s *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55)¹¹ is the first of these songs, followed by Zechariah’s *Benedictus* (Luke 1:67-79). After that, the angels will sing *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* (Luke 2:13-14), and Simeon will sing *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:28-32). Each of these songs takes its name from its first word or words in Latin. Here’s Mary’s Song:

*⁴⁶ And Mary said: My soul praises the greatness of the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God **my Savior**, ⁴⁸ because he has looked with favor on the humble condition of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹ because the Mighty One has done great things for me, and his name is holy. ⁵⁰ His mercy is from generation to generation on those who fear him. ⁵¹ He has done a mighty deed with his arm; he has scattered the proud because of the thoughts of their hearts; ⁵² he has toppled the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly. ⁵³ He has satisfied the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering his mercy ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he spoke to our ancestors.*

⁹ Technically, this would be considered parthenogenesis.

¹⁰ There may be an allusion here to Isaiah 32:15, and Matthew’s account specifically connects this event with Isaiah 7:14. Isaiah used the word for “young woman,” but Matthew quoted Isaiah using the word for “virgin.”

¹¹ See also Hannah’s Song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

Mary may or may not have spoken this poem or sung this song in that very moment of meeting Elizabeth. The text doesn't specifically say that it happened then, although Mary had had the three days of the journey south to pray and to ponder, and we will later be told that she was a person who reflected deeply on life (Luke 2:51).

However she composed it, Mary's Song is a beautiful, prophetic, Messianic affirmation, filled with concepts and phrases from the Hebrew Scriptures.¹² It is clear not only that Mary knew the Scripture well, but that she was affirming the dawning of the long-awaited Age of the Messiah, whose purpose would be to fulfill the promises God had made to the Patriarchs of Israel in the distant past.

Through her own study of Scripture and her own seeking after God, Mary had, "by so many roots as the marsh-grass sends in the sod, heartily laid hold on the greatness of God." In this, she is an example and encouragement for us, as well.

Mary followed a typical prophetic model in affirming what God was going to do using the past tense, as though these things had already taken place. God is a God who keeps promises, and the Bible often speaks in "the prophetic perfect" tense as an affirmation of that faithfulness.

It's noteworthy that in her very first sentence, Mary described God as "my Savior," which is an affirmation that, no matter how favored she might have been, she was still a sinner in need of redemption, even as you and I are. But there's more to see in this Song. Although the Song is beautiful, it actually strikes a revolutionary note. Mary's Song affirms that God scatters the proud, topples the mighty, exalts the lowly, sends the rich away empty, and fills the hungry with good things.

This is a statement of what we might call "Liberation Theology" today; and we Americans, who are often rich and mighty, proud and well-fed, would be wise to ponder her words. As one commentator put it, "If God chooses the poor, we are doomed. If God scatters the rich, the proud, and the powerful, we will be dust in the wind."

Mary's Song reminds us that spiritual greatness is not a matter of social class, monetary clout, or academic credentials. **Spiritual greatness is a matter of the heart.** God is unimpressed with the credentials our world honors. Externals don't matter to One who looks on the heart. "*Do not be afraid, Mary,*" the angel said. "*You have found favor with God*" (Luke 1:30).

As you and I move farther into Advent, perhaps Mary's Song can help us journey to a spiritual place where the land meets the sea. Perhaps we can join her in "the marshes of Glynn," so that we, too, might say:

As the marsh-hen secretly builds on the watery sod,
Behold I will build me a nest on the greatness of God . . .
By so many roots as the marsh-grass sends in the sod
I will heartily lay me a-hold on the greatness of God.

Amen, and Amen.

¹² One commentator identified twelve such allusions.