

The Blessed Mother

December 23, 2018

Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Anna McDermott]

“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, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He 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; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 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.’”

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Well first of all I want to say thank you to all of you for bearing with the crowdedness in the room today. We went to one service this week because we figured we'd have a light attendance day and Ryan just gave me the count— it's over 200 people.

[Cheering from the crowd]

So that's maybe 5 to 10 percent higher than our average over the last month or so. So we'll know next year that people don't travel for Christmas except the ones who travel here and visit their Artisan friends at Artisan Church. So it's great to be here with all of you; if don't I have a chance to meet you my name is Scott and I am the pastor here and I'm so glad that you're all here. And thanks for being patient with each other and a special shout out to the introverts who are like “oh my goodness”. Magnificat anima mea Dominum. 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. These words which we many of us know from the Latin word that starts them out “magnificat” happens to be the longest statement by any woman in the New Testament. They're spoken of course by Mary, the mother of Jesus. But before you can get to the “Magnificat” you have to kind of go through the Annunciation. So I'm going to read a little bit

2018-12-23 *The Blessed Mother*

more from Luke's gospel before we move on. We've had a lot of scripture reading during this season of Advent I'm going to give you just a little bit more because I think this is important as a foundation for what comes next. This is Luke 1:26-38:

“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear 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 to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’ Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.’ Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.”

So this is the Annunciation. And it's an important foundation for the remarkable words of the “Magnificat”, which is what the lectionary actually assigned to us today and I think it it lays an important foundation for our understanding not only of that remarkable reading but of the remarkable person that the lectionary points us to today, Mary, the mother of the Lord Jesus. Now some of you in the room are Catholic or used to be or cafeteria variety Catholics, which I hear is a thing, we Protestants or have anything like that.

[Laughter]

But those of you who have a Catholic background have a little bit of a head start on us in this regard because Mary is held in very high esteem in the traditional Roman Catholic theology, much higher than in Protestant circles. And as a matter of fact this is one of the reasons for one of the more just bitter disagreements in Church history. And those of us who have a Protestant mindset which really is the default in America, even if you're not a religious person. Those of us with that Protestant mindset we tend to shy away from Mary and from her story because we think it's like too Catholic or something, right? And that is a real shame because when we do that we lose the witness of one of the most important figures in the entirety of the Scriptures. And so I want for us to recover some of that today when it's to receive that witness from Mary today and to think about the blessed mother. And so here's how we'll do that, we've already

2018-12-23 *The Blessed Mother*

spent some time meditating on our work the visual images of Mary and now I'd like us to spend some time thinking about three pictures of Mary in our own head and you can make them yourself. And I want to think about Mary in three expressions or postures that I like to think she might have been in at various times during the story. I want to talk about Mary with her brow furrowed, I want to talk about Mary with her palms open and I want to talk about Mary with her fists raised.

So Mary with her brow furrowed can you make that expression, I know that you can because you sometimes make it while I'm preaching.

[Laughter]

Go ahead make your brow furrowed up like you do, yeah that's the one. But what does that face mean? It means you're confused, right? What's going on here when the angel said to Mary: "Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you" it says she was much perplexed by his words. And then of course it says: "How can this be?" When he elaborates on what this is, how can this be since I am a virgin? That's the that's the thing that she says, I think, with her brow furrowed. Did you notice that she gets an answer but it's probably not the most satisfying answer for the actual question she was posing? This happens a lot in the scriptures and it happens a lot to us today we ask God a question and we get an answer but it's not quite the answer to the exact question that we asked. Because ultimately the answer that the angel gives her is not to explain the miracle of this conception but rather to say that God can make it happen. Nothing will be impossible with God is the answer that Mary is given to the question how can this be? And that's an answer that I think we all can trust and rely on when we receive it even though it's not always the most satisfying type of answer. By the way, this is the same answer that Jesus gave to a particular question in one of his teachings do you know that story there's your Bible homework for the week, go find when Jesus says in answer to a question how can it be that we've gone all things are possible and study that in a little bit and see if you can find a connection between these two accounts because maybe those things are worded the same way for a reason. But sometimes when our own brows are furrowed at life, when we're in the depths of our confusion, that is the exact promise that we need to fall back on. Not that it's easy to do but it's that is what we need to do to fall back on the promise that nothing will be impossible with God. So there's our first expression of Mary as she has her brow furrowed. Some of you still have your brow furrowed I like it.

[Laughter]

The second one is Mary with her palms open. If you're in a position where you can do that would you put your palms out and see how that feels to you? What does this gesture signify?

2018-12-23 *The Blessed Mother*

What does this indicate? An openness or receiving. Mary says "Here am I the servant of the Lord let it be with me according to your word". Now it's interesting, she did not get the exact answer to her exact question and she still said here my the servant of the Lord let it be with me according to your word. Mary's obedience is really remarkable. I think sometimes our popular imagery around Mary prevents us from grasping the depths of what this is because Mary is often pictured, not always as you've seen, but often pictured as a very serene figure, right? And I'm not sure that she felt serene and, more importantly, I'm not sure that you have to feel serene in order to be obedient to God and open to what God wants to do in and through your life. And so we have this popular conception of a person in a particular way and I wonder sometimes if that popular conception prevents us from accessing the power of what's actually happening with Mary. Relatedly come back tomorrow for my sermon about a way in a manger and how Jesus wasn't crying, 4 and 6 pm, we'll have 2 services, plenty of room. But here's the thing, for an unwed teenage peasant girl to be found pregnant in a society where a woman's value was entirely based on her ability and potential to bear children for her husband to enlarge his family her situation was potentially a literal death sentence, that was the penalty in Jewish law for adultery, which would have been everybody's assumption about how she became pregnant before she was married. Potentially she could have been stoned to death. So there's no way she wasn't worried, even terrified, fearing for her very life. But that fear did not prevent her from opening her hands and accepting the calling that God gave her and very importantly it did not prevent her that fear did not prevent her from succeeding in that calling. So that gesture of having your palms open it may feel like a sort of a surrender and giving up and in a way it is. But I want you to accompany that feeling with the idea of trusting in God; that God will do the impossible through you despite any of the shortcomings, or limitations, or risks you might have to face, despite any of your fear, and any of your doubts, any of your weakness, despite your lack of power or means nothing will be impossible with God. Open your palms and let it be.

That's the second posture. And the third and final posture is this: Mary with her fist raised. This one might make you feel a little bit outside your comfort zone and ask you to raise your fist. If you've gone over to Baber AME Church with us and we sing "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing the black National Anthem" and Pastor Simon says "in the third verse I want you all to raise your fist". I'm kinda like I'm not sure this is for me.

[Laughter]

But it is because I'm here. And with her fists raised, I imagine, she says he has brought down the powerful from their thrones. Now remember that Mary's people, the israelites, they were under the rule of an oppressive Roman Empire who had installed a puppet king. An ostensibly

2018-12-23 *The Blessed Mother*

Jewish King Herod, who was named to be the King of the Jews, which is one of the reasons why that title became so problematic for Jesus in the end or was at the beginning. And this puppet king basically just kept all the Jewish people under the thumb of the Empire, he was a tyrant. You can hear it in other Jewish texts, for example the Psalm that was read so beautifully by Carrie at the call to worship today, do you remember that? “Oh Lord God of Hosts, How long will you be angry with your people's prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors. Our enemies laugh among themselves” and then that refrain “restore us, oh God of hosts, let your face shine that we may be saved”. Don't do the don't do the protestant evangelical thing and say they're talking about like saying the sinner's prayer. When they say restore us so that we may be saved they're making a statement about their situation in the world. And the fact that they are oppressed at various times in their history— by Babylon, by Assyria, by Rome, by Egypt. And with that understanding of what Mary's culture was you may be able to receive a new meaning from the words “he has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly” from her hometown she could look up and see this monstrosity of a palace that King Herod lived in. “He has filled the hungry with good things unsaid sent the rich away empty”. So in this moment this magnificent song Mary's trust and obedience can be seen coming to its fruition. And the fruit of that trust comes out and almost boils over in this fiery statement about how God has heard the cries of the people. The statement is a confidence that God will act, that God has begun to act, that God is on the move. And it's a defiant statement against the corrupt rulers of the world. Those who enrich themselves on the backs of the poor. Those who oppress the weak rather than caring for them. Those who fatten themselves while the people go hungry. The “Magnificat”, this is no “Pledge of Allegiance” this is no “My Country Tis of Thee” this is no “God Save the Queen”. This song of Mary is closer to the Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympic Games. It's a very political statement and it would be entirely disingenuous of me to describe it any other way. That being said as you look to Mary's example today. You may not feel the political struggle the strongest right now. Your struggles may not feel very political to you in this moment and I think Mary's example is still of great use to you. You can still look to her and imagine her with her fists raised. And you can still raise your own fist in a defiant hope for a better future. Whatever that might look like thanks to God's work in the world through you in you and around you.

So for three expressions of Mary: the furrowed brow, the palms open, the fists raised. I see in those three gestures a transition in Mary's heart from perplexity to obedience to empowerment. And I think that that progression is possible to some extent for all of us, which is in no way by the way to take away from Mary's exceptional nature. The title the Blessed of Mother is not a phrase that Protestants like to use very much but the text is very clear “all

2018-12-23 *The Blessed Mother*

generations will call you blessed". But in her blessedness we are given an example of the growth that is possible for each one of us from perplexity to obedience to empowerment. So think again about those three gestures, those three postures the furrowed brow, the palms open, the fist raised. And I want you to ask yourself: Which one of these postures am I embodying in my life right now today? What stage of this process do I find myself in right now? You may not be satisfied with your answer you may wish it was the next one. Or you may feel like you had attained the one that you think is the best and now you find yourself at the one you think you are is the worst and you're wondering how that even happened. I don't want you to be ashamed of which which stage of this process you're participating in right now. Did you notice that God considered Mary blessed and inside God's favor before the angel even came? God was with Mary at each stage of that process and God is with each one of you no matter where you are in that process. So the question that you should ask yourself, if I were your personal spiritual director this is what I would tell you, is not the question why am I this way and not that way? But a much better much more fruitful question, which is what does God ask of me right now wherever I am? And you can look to Mary as an example. That's what I'd like you to contemplate as we come to take Communion together.

We have a number of visitors with us today and it's important for you to know that Artisan's Communion table is open to all who are seeking to follow Jesus however well or poorly you may feel you do at that task. You don't need to be a member of Artisan Church, you don't need to be a member in fact of any church you simply need to be trusting Jesus and seeking the strength that he offers in this Sacrament of bread and wine. His body and blood broken for you shed for the forgiveness of sins. You'll notice if you come to the table we have a number of options there's a regular bread, there's a gluten-free bread, we we have in this cup the kind of all in one sealed ones for those who might need that and there's both wine and juice and just choose the combination that's for you and for your family. And you can take a piece of the bread and dip in one of the cups receive it right there at the table. If you come up through these two middle aisles to the table and then go out by the two outer aisles that will help our flow with the room being as full as it is. And we also have a member of the prayer team who usually camps out at the back corner there. I'm not sure they're going to much room so it looks like I'm getting pointed to the lobby, if you like to receive personal prayer this morning the member the prayer team will be in the lobby to meet you there and we'll be happy to pray with you. We're going to sing a couple more songs together while we take communion and encourage you to respond however you might since the Spirit's presence in your life today. Our table is open, come and receive Him. Amen.

[end of sermon]

2018-12-23 *The Blessed Mother*

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com