

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

December 22, 2024

“Born Into Politics”

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you want to know who has power in a system, find out who you aren't allowed to criticize. Have you heard that bit of wisdom before? I'm a student of history, and that study largely bears that wisdom out. Powerful people know that they need to project an air of invulnerability and strength and will generally not brook being mocked or challenged. This often gets translated into specific laws and policies, but it can also be entrenched through cultural norms.

How about another old adage that one should “never talk politics or religion in polite company”? That sentiment is very useful for those in power! It is also rather unbiblical. People talking about religion and politics can be found all over scripture! And not just those taboo subjects, but pretty much the full range of human experiences, both good and bad, are at least touched on. And that should come as no surprise. What do you think it means that the “Word became flesh and lived among us”? That somehow God-in-Christ would navigate human reality without engaging with human reality?

One of the main points of the Incarnation is that God joins us, fully, in our broken and limited reality. Of course that means politics and religion too! As well as sex and gender, violence and justice, warfare and peace, and all other aspects of what it means to be human. It certainly means birth and all the accompanying chaos and commotion that event brings with it.

The birth of a child is a powerful event in a parent's life, and it starts to impact us long before the child is in our arms. We see some of that at work in our reading today from Luke. And what it elicits...the song Mary belts forth, what a powerful testimony to the realities of human experience!

In a very real way Mary's Magnificat reflects the common hopes that many parents have for their children. In anticipating the birth of or finalization of adoption papers for a child, parents get caught up in a mishmash of past, present, and future. Remember, at this point Mary does not know who Jesus will become in history yet, though she does have a prophetic vision of his role in history. And all the changes she prophetically expects from God-in-Christ in her Magnificat, are related to the political order of the time.

he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant... (Lk 1:48a)
the Mighty One has done great things for me... (Lk 1:49a)
he has scattered the proud... (Lk 1:51b)
He has brought down the powerful... (Lk 1:52a)
lifted up the lowly... (Lk 1: 52b)
filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty... (Lk. 1:53)

Oddly enough, nothing seems to indicate that Mary expects Jesus to usher in a new religion. Rather, the song that Mary sings at the prompting of the Spirit, while steeped in Jewish phrasing, is full of political language. Perhaps the Magnificat will become the lullaby Mary will sing over the growing baby Jesus through the early years. It's not hard to imagine that the child hearing these words from birth would grow up to say "the last shall be first, the first shall be last" in his own ministry.

What I find especially fascinating in all of this is the source of all this political talk. Mary. But not only Mary! For Mary is echoing the song of Hannah. Which is equally full of politics! Let me share some portions of Hannah's song with you now and you can see how similar it is to Mary's:

My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God... (1 Sam. 2:1b)
The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength... (1 Sam. 2:4)
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil... (1 Sam. 2:5a)
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 Sam. 2:8)

Mary and Hannah, one young, one barren. Both with little to no power or influence. Both largely living at the whims of the men in their lives. Both have extraordinary news given to them. Both are filled with the Spirit and burst forth in song. Both Spirit-filled songs speak of political upheaval and change. Both songs identify God as siding with the poor, the lowly, and the oppressed over and against the rich and powerful, the mighty and the self-satisfied. Two women of lowly status, hear the promises of God and immediately their thoughts turn to politics and power.

Why might that be? Why might two women of no power, no status, no rights be interested in political upheaval? Gee...I wonder...

Both Hannah and Mary are singing of a hoped-for future in which God fulfills the promises of old. Promises of abundant life for **all**. Promises of abundance for **all**. Promises of home and family, health and community for **all**. Promises of justice and mercy for **all**. Promises of compassion and connection for **all**. Both women boldly call upon God to create the future they desperately want for themselves and their babies; the just future that God has promised of old.

What future do you want for yourself? For your babies? For the generations that follow after us? Are you, like Mary and Hannah, looking for a future that is drastically different from the present? One that looks more like the Kingdom of God than the kingdoms of men? I know I am.

Do you think we can accomplish that hoped-for future, that hoped-for kingdom of God without talking about it? Because if you do, I have some bad news for you...

Here's the thing, Jesus is God-with-us. Born into human reality...all of human reality, including corrupt politics and dirty money. The details and systems have changed flavors over the last two millennia; but there are still billions of people like Mary and Hannah, yearning for an upheaval, a reversal of the power structures. We still find ourselves in systems that funnel absurd wealth to the top, while oppressing and crushing billions of people at the bottom. People like Hannah and her son, Samuel. People like Mary and her son, Jesus.

This is not how God intends for us to live, for us to be. If we earnestly wish to follow the Way of Jesus Christ we have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. We have to be willing to say difficult things, broach taboo subjects, speak truth even to power. Mary shows us how, trust in the Spirit and start singing, or speaking, or acting. Amen.