

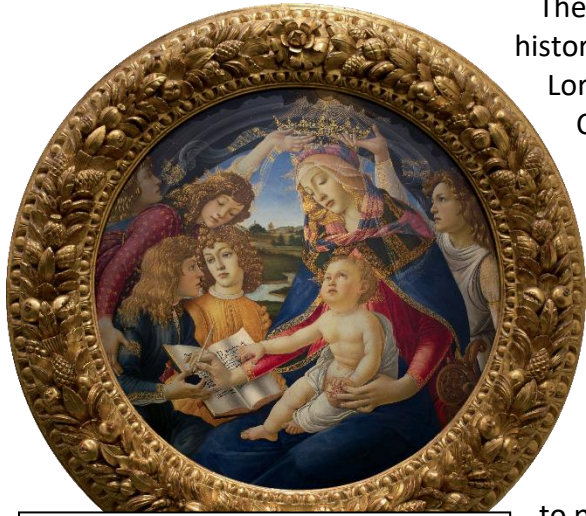
The Collect we read for this Sunday is a rather famous one in the history of our church. It starts with the words “Stir up your power, O Lord...” Now, when the Lectionary was first put together by Thomas Cranmer, this Collect was actually reserved for the last Sunday of the Church year, which falls about 1 month before Christmas. Since traditional English Christmas puddings needed to be made about a month in advance to give them the necessary time to season, the last Sunday of the church year quickly became dubbed, a little tongue-in-cheek as “Stir-Up Sunday,” the week all those Christmas puddings were to be stirred up. I suppose with the advent of fast-food, the collect was moved much closer to Christmas in the 3rd Sunday of Advent! ☺

Of all the things that have struck me this year in preparing to preach for this, the 3rd Sunday of Advent, I have been most captured by the timelessness of these passages. I don’t mean just the fact that these truths endure over time. More than that, one gets the impression that time as understood in human terms has no meaning for the Creator God, who is able to collapse the events of eons into a single, fleeting, moment-less happening.

The first sense of this mystically timelessness comes to us in the Old Testament passage from Isaiah 35, where the ultimate redemption of God’s children along the Pilgrim Road to the new Jerusalem is foreseen. In naming these participants in God’s salvation, Isaiah uses a very specific word. He calls us the redeemed, (See Is.35:9) just as the Children of Israel were named by God when he assured Moses that they would be rescued from their enslavement to Pharaoh. (See Ex. 6:6) It seems that God, in the timelessness of his action and intent was already planning your salvation and mine, even before he parted the waters of the Red Sea so very long ago.

Even as I write these words in the sunroom of our house near St. Mary’s, the wind is blowing through the autumn colors of the live oaks and gums, announcing the coming of a cold front. And with this act of nature and nature’s God, I am reminded of the awesome yet un-see-able presence in our lives of the other “Wind of God” the Holy Spirit. It is yet other evidence for the omniscience of the Creator God, that really does permeate everything in which we live, move, and have our being – an omniscience that is surely not curtailed by anything as paltry as the concept of human time.

The glorious Canticle that we heard, which is the traditional reading for “Rose Sunday” the third Sunday in Advent is surely Mother Mary’s glorification of her God, when she realizes the immense wonder and privilege that has been placed upon her as “*Theotokos*” the “God-Bearer.” But, it should seem familiar to you. You will have noted in this amazing song of Jesus’ mother attributes which stir the human soul. The *Magnificat* begins with Mary’s proclamation that her soul exists supremely to glorify her Lord in whom she rejoices. (See Lk.1:46) And Mother Mary goes on to describe the attributes of her God in absolute righteousness, as bringing justice to those who are oppressed, bounty to those who hunger, and a mercy on the faithful which extends beyond the generations. (See Lk. 1:50,53) This redeeming God also visits his justice on the oppressors of this world, confounding the proud in the vain imaginings of their own hearts, by bringing low the haughty from their places of privilege, and by separating the powerful from their ill-gotten gain. (See Lk.1: 51-53) Finally, Mary identifies her God as one who is completely faithful to the Covenants he made with his children, and she foresees a blessed reign where God will make an everlasting Covenant of mercy with his children, a free-offering of God’s grace which can never be severed (See Lk.1:54-55) Because with the new Covenant, God promises to remain faithful to his children; even when we wander, his mercy remains resolute.



Madonna of the Magnificat, Botticelli

So, yes, this *Magnificat* of Mary should absolutely resonate profoundly with all of us in our yearning for God's infinite mercy and grace. But more than that, for you students of the Bible these words and phrases should also seem strangely, perhaps hauntingly familiar. Because, near the beginning of the story, there was another young woman, who was given a son. And when this blessed event arrived, this other young woman, Hannah by name would Christian her Son, "Samuel" or "God Hears." And this child would also do great things for God, and Hannah in her own moment of prophetic jubilation sang another song of praise to God, which went like this:

'My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you, no Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven children, but she who has many children is forlorn. The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. 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. For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and on them he has set the world. He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed.'

And sure enough, this other child Samuel would live to anoint the youngest son of a sheep farmer. And that young man, David would go onto found a dynasty from which would spring none other than the Savior of the World himself. There is a timelessness, you see, in the events of this universe which testify to the very present act of our salvation, an action which began with that very first letting be of light, and which is still in full flood as we sit in this Church today. It's a profound truth recognized by various theologians that, "We have been saved, we are being saved, we will be saved." For God's saving of his children is without time.

Isn't it fascinating that in this morning's Gospel passage from Matthew Chapter 11, John asks Jesus himself about Our Lord's true identity? If you needed to prove someone's identity – for instance, if you were going to hire someone for an important job, what would you do? You might Google them on the Internet. You could hire a private investigator to confirm that the person is who she says she is. You could ask the candidate for letters of reference and a résumé. But you would never think of taking someone's word at face-value as proof that he is who he says he is – unless that someone were a very special someone. But for John, the word of Jesus is enough. The only thing John has to do in order to know who the Lord really is, is to ask Him. That's an incredibly profound statement, and it's just as true for you and for me as it was for John the Baptist. The fact is, so few people actually ask Jesus who He really is. When we begin to explore that question, that's when the Holy Spirit can really start moving in our lives. But modern Western culture has certainly spent an awful lot of time and money trying to prove who they think He **isn't!**

Jesus' answer to John's disciples is, I think, representative of the way that God answers so many of our questions. He is not going to play mind games with us. My experience has been that God generally provides answers to my questions and prayers with a combination of two different types of answer. First, He provides for us a Spiritual component in His answers, through a process of revelation which is guided by the Holy Spirit. This is often an emotional moment when we realize the profound way in which God has done something amazing in our lives or in the lives of those dear to us. It's not something you can easily define in real-world terms, and this visit of the Holy Spirit is often accompanied by tears – usually tears of joy.

But The Lord also provides proof for us through “real-world” results. Often, this kind of evidence that the Lord is hearing and answering my questions and prayers, comes through the way my life or the lives of others are changed through His grace. I think this combination of Spiritual and “real-world” answer to prayer is what Luke 11:11-13 is all about. That’s the passage where Jesus demonstrates God’s goodness by illustrating that even the broken parents of this worldly life know how to give good things to their children. So, with this real-world evidence in mind, don’t we believe that the all loving Father in Heaven will give ever so much more blessing to his children, if we will only ask him?

The timelessness of the Bible I was speaking about at the beginning of this sermon speaks particularly clearly to me in Matthew 11:6, “Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” Blessed are those who do not find me an obstacle to their faith.” Looking at this from the standpoint of the Jewish readers of this Gospel in the first century AD, the “obstacle” would have been whether the Jews believed that their Messiah had really come. But Jesus is still an obstacle to the faith of our modern secular minds. To really come to be followers of Jesus, we have to be willing to accept Him as much more than just “a very good man” or “a very loving teacher.” Sadly, the inability of so many people to take the necessary leap, and come to know Jesus as the Risen Lord is indeed, an obstacle to their faith. Can you see how the words of Scripture are so incredibly powerful and timeless?

Returning to today’s Collect for a moment, Thomas Cranmer’s plea that God’s mercy and grace will stir us up and “speedily help and deliver us” might seem somewhat in contrast to James’ encouragement to us this morning to, “be patient...until the coming of the Lord” (See Jas.5:7a) Why would Cranmer have written a prayer for speedy deliverance, a plea that seems to be at odds with James’ counsel towards waiting patiently? Aren’t these two points of view contradictory?

Not really. For me, what is going on here is that while it is often necessary to wait on God’s time to have our prayers answered, we none-the-less have to come to the point where we realize that God’s help is both urgent and critical in our lives. A heart-felt prayer to God, the kind He truly listens to is not a list of “nice-to-haves.” For our prayer-lives to be really effective, we need to get to that point where we realize that we are sorely in need of God’s mercy. We have to come to the realization that God’s presence in our lives is not optional. An absolute assurance that this kind of grace and mercy isn’t coming from any other quarter is essential, if we want to know the full blessing of Our Lord.

But, in the midst of all this timelessness of God’s love and mercy, I feel that I need to point out to you how, in our living these days, you and I are doubly blessed. Near the end of the Epistle passage for this morning, James encourages the early Christians to emulate by way of example “the prophets who spoke in the name of the lord” (See Jas.5:10) There were, you see, countless throngs of Old Testament Saints of God. These were the ones who knew with absolute certainty that the God of absolute and infinite love would never abandon his children to death. Though they could not see his face, these holy ones of the Old Testament lived their lives in the assurance that God’s Messiah would one day come and take them home. You and I, on the other hand live on the far side of that green hill far away. For God’s son has come to dwell among us, and we have seen his face of grace and truth. And So it is that we too embark once again on the Pilgrim Road to the New Jerusalem. A road which goes by a certain stable near Bethlehem, where we too say along with the shepherds, “Come let us go and see this great thing that is happening.”

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. JWB+ 11-20-16