

Great and Holy Things

Luke 1:49-50

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December 8, 2019

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

It was about ten years into my youth ministry career before I saw a book on professional development for youth ministers. Prior to the release of *This Way to Youth Ministry* and *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry*, most of the books about youth ministry were how-to books: How to Lead a Small Group; How to Organize a Mission Trip; How to Direct a Spontaneous Melodrama. And the best how-to book – the one every youth minister had was a big book called “Play It!” This book was an encyclopedia of youth ministry games – games for small groups; games for large groups; games with a point; and games just for fun.

One of the games in this book was named, “Sanctuary Whiffle Ball.” This game was designed to be played in a Sanctuary like ours. The batter would stand somewhere close to the front, while the fielders were spread throughout the pews. Instead of a diamond infield, the base path went straight down the center aisle. If the batter was able to put the ball in play, he would run down the center aisle while the fielders tried to quickly retrieve the ball from under the pews without banging their heads.

It sounded like a fun game. But I never played it with a youth group. It didn’t feel right. Something about playing this game in the Sanctuary felt a little funky. Now, to be

fair, the game instructions did suggest that you clear it with your Senior Minister before playing. But, I didn't even propose it. It just felt a little sacrilege.

Some of you might agree. On one end of the spectrum are those who think: "It's probably not a good idea – someone might be offended." On the other end of the spectrum are those who are convinced that God would smite those who would dare to use the Sanctuary in such a way. And wherever you are on this spectrum, the concern in playing a game in the Sanctuary is that it is unholy.

Holy is a word we think we know. It means set apart; sacred. When we think about something holy, we talk about it in hushed tones. We read the *Holy Bible*. When we sing about something holy, our tendency is to sing about it beautifully. Such is the case with the classic hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty." Such is the case with the praise chorus, "Open the Eyes of My Heart." And we definitely would characterize "O Holy Night" as beautiful. There is a beautiful triplet melody being played while a soloist sings: *O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining. It is the night of our dear Savior's birth.*

The problem is, to think of holiness as beautiful is spiritually irresponsible. It's playing with fire.

This morning during the lighting of the Advent candles, we shared some of the prophecy of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. Isaiah was the one who declared: "For unto us a child is born, a son is given." But before this truth is declared in chapter 9, the story of Isaiah in the Jerusalem Temple is told in chapter 6. The king of Judah had just died, and in the midst of this uncertainty, Isaiah went to the Temple seeking peace and stability. But Isaiah didn't find anything calming and settling there. Instead, God showed up. Isaiah saw the Lord seated on his throne, lofty and exalted, and his robe filled the temple. There were strong heavenly creatures with wings surrounding him, crying out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory." Isaiah's response to seeing this was to cower in the corner, afraid and ashamed.

As the foundations of the temple shook and it filled with smoke, Isaiah didn't sweetly sing, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty." Instead, he cried out, "Woe is me...(for) I am a man of unclean lips who lives among a people of unclean lips...I am ruined because I have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." What Isaiah knew was that a Holy God was a consuming fire. As the author of Hebrews described it: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31). There really isn't much about God's holiness that we would find beautiful.

Throughout Advent here at First Christian Church, we are looking at Mary's *Magnificat* – the song of praise Mary sang after receiving confirmation from Elizabeth that she was blessed. As I said last week, the *Magnificat* is like a magnifying glass. It takes different aspects of God and helps enlarge those aspects so that we might see God more clearly and relate to God more directly. And, one of the aspects of God that needs to be enlarged comes in verse 49.

There, Mary sings:

*For the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.*

When someone is graduating, or achieving a particular milestone, or moving into a new position, it's common to tell them, "You're going to do great things!" When we say this, we expect that they will do something impactful; something significant; something memorable. We believe they are going to make something of themselves and not just occupy space and steal oxygen.

The first part of Mary's statement fits our understanding of God. We expect that an omnipotent, all powerful God, can and will do great things – things that are impactful, significant, and memorable. "God is great and God is good" we pray before eating, because we believe it to be true. And we can say that because we know the Bible is filled with God doing great things: Creation; parting the Red Sea; giving the Promised Land to the Israelites.

And the great things of God aren't limited to the Old Testament. The New Testament also features God doing great things: the Holy Spirit falling upon the believers on the day of Pentecost; the rapid expansion of the church, with thousands being added daily; the final victory over evil recorded in Revelation. Of course, we can't forget the many great things done by Jesus. It was these things of Jesus that Mary was foreshadowing.

The best part about the great things of God that Mary sang about was that God had done them for her. They weren't general good things. They were good things for her. The greatness of God was a contrast to her weakness. God was doing great things for her and through her that would not have been possible for a young, powerless woman of her day.

But a shift is about to occur. Verse 49 is the last verse of the *Magnificat* in which Mary will refer to herself. Up until now, there have been three "my's" and two "me's." From this point forward, Mary's entire focus will be on what God is accomplishing for God's people. The clue to this comes in the second part of verse 49:

*For the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.*

This is Mary's prophetic combination of the personal and the universal – a chilling prophecy to all those in power at the time. The Mighty One had done great things, on the personal level, for Mary, a girl unknown to any of those who claimed worldly power of possession.ⁱ But when Mary says, "And holy is his name," it's almost like she is saying: "The Mighty One has done great things for me, but 'you ain't seen nothing yet!'" Holy is his name and you are just about to witness just how holy.

A moment ago, we described holiness as something set apart. In particular, what the holy God is set apart from is sin. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the long-time minister of the Westminster Chapel, once wrote that:

God is eternally opposed to sin. He hates it. And it because he hates it that there is salvation. God made the world; made it perfect, there was nothing wrong; there was no blemish; he looked at it

and saw that it was good. But sin came in...and God in his holiness cannot tolerate it...God, being God, cannot leave the world as it is, in sin. No, that is utterly opposed to him and he will get rid of it.ⁱⁱ

In other words, because God is holy, God is going to work to rid the world of everything that is unholy. And this ought to cause us to sit up straight. It ought to unhinge us like Isaiah. After all, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23). You and I, we are sinners. We have fallen short. There are dire consequences to being opposed to God as we are when we sin.

The fact is, many people don't think of themselves as sinners. They don't think their actions have any consequence. They think, like the French philosopher Voltaire, that "God will forgive me, after all, that's his job!" Even if we find that statement to be blasphemous, we do the same thing when we excuse our own behavior that is outside the lines of God's will for us. "I'm sure God understands," we think.

But if God is holy, there is nothing warm and fuzzy about God. If God is holy, there is nothing that should make us think that God is going to look the other way when we rebel from doing what God has asked us not to do. If God is holy, there is nothing that suggests God is not serious about God's opposition to sin and desire to get rid of it. This is the holiness that had Isaiah crouching in a fetal position in the Jerusalem temple.

Let's be honest. We don't like to think about God in this way. We like God to be the loving, forgiving type. And we'll get there. But we can't understand the love and forgiveness of God without the holiness of God. Nothing about God makes any sense if we don't keep God's holiness in mind. It is this wrath – this fundamental opposition to sin - that gives the gospel's message of God's love in Jesus Christ its foundation.

After Mary declared that the Mighty One's name was holy, she sings:

*And His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.*

Here is where it all comes together. If God were only almighty and holy, there would be no hope for us at all. If God were only almighty and holy, we should all be blotted out; the whole world would be destroyed and there would be no salvation. But thank God for the little ‘and.’ Holy is the name of the Mighty One *and* his mercy is for those who fear him. The fact that God is glorious in holiness *and* full of mercy is what saves us.ⁱⁱⁱ

Martyn Lloyd-Jones says it like this:

It is because God hates sin with all of the intensity of his holy nature that there is salvation. It is because his name is holy that he must deal with sin, that he must bring in redemption.^{iv}

What Mary told the people of the first century was that they had all perceived God’s power and punishment moving through their world. But now God was about to show them something different. They should still fear God, but what they should fear is the loss of God. They shouldn’t fear knowing God but fear missing God. They shouldn’t fear angering God, but fear hurting God. They shouldn’t fear only disobeying God, but fear disappointing God.^v

Today, you and I have lots of fears. We fear what goes bump in the night. We fear the final exam the professor is handing out. We fear whether the next round of job cuts will eliminate our position. We fear cancer diagnoses and a thousand other things that might undo all that we have worked for. We might think that fearing God is just one more thing to add to the list.

But fearing God is different – it’s the difference between fearing God and dreading God. Jesus is that difference.^{vi} What God was going to do for the world, Mary sang, was to personify God’s mercy. Jesus was the personification of God’s mercy. And what dreads and destroys, fear – the “good fear” that Jesus taught and displayed – increases our love for God and our desire to be closer to him.

That's what we remind ourselves of at the Table each week. We remember here that the holy God, so opposed to sin, did something about it in Jesus Christ. He extended mercy to dreadful, sinful people like you and me. Here we remember that Jesus calls us to, and makes possible, a relationship with God. But this wasn't just for you and me. Mary didn't sing, "But his mercy is for those who fear him." She sang, "And his mercy..." From this time forward, God would be all about "and." The whole world was being added to the equation. *For God so loved the whole world that he gave his only son...* (John 3:16)

God's solution to sin could have been destruction. But instead, God chose construction. By God's mercy, the Holy God chose to build a community, a body of beloved children of God spanning generation after generation. And, every time we gather at the Table, we remember Mary's suggestion that we "Ain't seen nothing yet" when it comes to God's mercy. That mercy may be the most great and holy – the most beautiful - thing we can point to, and sing about, and celebrate in this season...and always.

ⁱ Alborghetti, Marci. *My Spirit Rejoices: Imagining and Praying the Magnificat with Mary*. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2015.

ⁱⁱ Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn. *Christmas Sermons: An Exposition of the Magnificat*. Bryntirion, Bridgend, Wales, UK: Bryntirion Press, 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Alborghetti

^{vi} Ibid.