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May 31st: Deuteronomy 32 & Luke 1:39-56

May 30, 2020



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The Song of Moses. Mary and the Visitation.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Deuteronomy 32. Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth. May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distill as the dew, like gentle rain upon the tender grass, and like showers upon the herb.

For I will proclaim the name of the Lord, ascribe greatness to our God, the Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are justice, a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is He. They have dealt corruptly with Him. They are no longer His children because they are blemished.

They are a crooked and twisted generation. Do you thus repay the Lord, you foolish and senseless people? Is not He your Father, who created you, who made you and established you? Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations, ask your Father and He will show you, your elders, and they will tell you. When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when He divided mankind, He fixed the

borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.

But the Lord's portion is His people, Jacob, His allotted heritage. He found Him in the desert land and in the howling waste of the wilderness. He encircled Him, He cared for Him, He kept Him as the apple of His eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions.

The Lord alone guided Him. No foreign God was with Him. He made Him ride on the high places of the land, and He ate the produce of the field.

And He suckled Him with honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock, curds from the herd, and milk from the flock, with fat of lambs, rams, abatement, and goats, with the very finest of the wheat. And you drank foaming wine made from the blood of the grape. But Joshua grew fat and kicked.

You grew fat, stout, and sleek. Then He forsook God who made Him, and scoffed at the rock of His salvation. They stirred Him to jealousy with strange gods, with abominations they provoked Him to anger.

They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. You were unmindful of the rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth. The Lord saw it and spurned them, because of the provocation of His sons and His daughters.

And He said, I will hide My face from them. I will see what their end will be, for they are a perverse generation, children in whom is no faithfulness. They have made Me jealous with what is no God.

They have provoked Me to anger with their idols, so I will make them jealous with those who are no people. I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation. For a fire is kindled by My anger, and it burns to the depths of Sheol, devours the earth and its increase, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains.

And I will heap disasters upon them. I will spend My arrows on them. They shall be wasted with hunger, and devoured by plague, and poisonous pestilence.

I will send the teeth of beasts against them, with the venom of things that crawl in the dust. Outdoors the sword shall bereave, and indoors terror, for young man and woman alike, the nursing child with the man of grey hairs. I would have said, I will cut them to pieces, I will wipe them from human memory, had I not feared provocation by the enemy, lest their adversaries should misunderstand, lest they should say, Our hand is triumphant.

It was not the Lord who did all this. But they are a nation void of counsel, and there is no understanding in them. If they were wise, they would understand this, they would

discern their latter end.

How could one have chased a thousand, and two have put ten thousand to flight, unless their rock had sold them, and the Lord had given them up? For their rock is not as our rock, our enemies are by themselves, for their vine comes from the vine of Sodom, and from the fields of Gomorrah. Their grapes are grapes of poison, their clusters are bitter, their wine is the poison of serpents, and the cruel venom of asps. Is not this laid up in store with me, sealed up in my treasuries? Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip, for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly.

For the Lord will vindicate His people, and have compassion on His servants, when He sees that their power is gone, and there is none remaining, bond or free, then He will say, Where are their gods, the rock in which they took refuge? Who ate the fat of their sacrifices, and drank the wine of their drink-offering? Let them rise up and help you, let them be your protection. See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no God beside me. I kill and I make alive, I wound and I heal, and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

For I lift up my hand to heaven, and swear, as I live for ever, if I sharpen my flashing sword, and my hand takes hold on judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries, and will repay those who hate me. I will make my arrows drunk with blood, and my sword shall devour flesh, with the blood of the slain and the captives, from the long-haired heads of the enemy. Rejoice with Him, O heavens! Bow down to Him, all gods! For He avenges the blood of His children, and takes vengeance on His adversaries.

He repays those who hate Him, and cleanses His people's land. Moses came and recited all the words of this song in the hearing of the people, he and Joshua the son of Nun. And when Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, he said to them, Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law.

For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. That very day the Lord spoke to Moses, Go up this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab opposite Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel for a possession. And die on the mountain in which you go up, and be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother died in Mount Hor and was gathered to his people.

Because you broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel at the waters of Meribah Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin, and because you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel. For you shall see the land before you, but you shall not go there, into the land that I am giving to the people of Israel. With the chapter that follows it, Deuteronomy chapter 32 is a poetic climax to the whole book of Deuteronomy.

It is a piece of prophecy in the form of a song, and it is a sort of covenant lawsuit presented against Israel for its future unfaithfulness. It recounts their history and also declares their future. It begins with an appeal to the heaven and the earth, calling them to witness the words of Moses.

Along with the song and the book of the law, the heaven and the earth are witnesses to the covenant. They also serve to mediate God's judgement to Israel for its unfaithfulness if it fails to keep the covenant. Moses compares his prophetic speech to the rain and the dew.

They give life and growth to the earth that depend upon them. And this is a way of thinking about the word of the Lord more generally. The people, if they are to flourish as a planting of the Lord in the land, need to drink in the rain.

And there are different kinds of rain. There's gentle rain, but there's also heavy stormy rain, and both seem to be spoken of here. Moses proclaims the name of the Lord.

He summons the people to the faithfulness that the covenant calls for from them. He speaks of the Lord as the rock of Israel. The rock is a source of provision, a source of security and refuge, a place of shelter, a foundation, something that is enduring.

And this is a particularly powerful metaphor in the context of the wilderness experience. Moses also uses imagery of rocks and mountains in the great Psalm 90, which is the Psalm of Moses, verses 1 and 2. Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations, before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting your God. The Lord is the enduring rock, the one who does not change, the one who is a secure place of refuge and shelter.

There is a sharp contrast between the faithfulness and consistency of the Lord and the faithlessness and inconstancy of Israel. Their corruption undermines their status as his children. Even though the Lord is their maker and their father, they reject and turn their backs on him.

The Lord's election of Israel goes back to the very beginning. God appointed the barons for all of the nations of the world. Israel is not the only nation for which the Lord has a purpose.

When the Lord as God Most High established the nations, presumably in Genesis 10, he set their number according to the number of the sons of God. Some regard this as a reference to the number of the Israelites, the number 70 being associated both with Israel's ruling body, the elders, and the number of the nations. However, this does not explain the contrast of verse 9, which suggests that the Lord has Israel as his own inheritance, presumably over against some other parties that have the other nations as theirs.

The answer, I believe, is found in understanding that the sons of God are referring to the heavenly beings. This is a reading that is testified very early on, prior to the birth of Christ. The teaching, then, is that God, when he established the nations, established them according to the number of the heavenly beings, with each being being appointed to oversee one of the nations.

These heavenly beings were the God's angelic powers. They were created by God and under his rule, but the nations were put within their charge. They mediated the rule of the Lord over these nations and participated in the divine council.

However, the Lord himself claimed Israel for his own. Deuteronomy 4, verse 20 speaks of this. But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day.

Verses 10-11 speak of the time in the wilderness as a sort of origin to Israel's existence. He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions. This is similar to Hosea 9, verse 10.

Like grapes in the wilderness I found Israel, like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season I saw your fathers. But they came to Baal Peor and consecrated themselves to the thing of shame, and became detestable like the thing they loved. Notably, verses 10-11 of Deuteronomy 32 borrow the language of Genesis 1, verses 1-2.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of waters. The word that Genesis 1 uses for being without form is the word used for waste in Deuteronomy 32.

We might also see plays upon the word used for void in Genesis chapter 1 in these verses here. The most significant parallel however is between the hovering of the Spirit over the waters in Genesis chapter 1, and the hovering of the eagle that represents the Lord in Deuteronomy 32. The establishment of Israel then is like an event of a new creation.

It's a creation of something new out of nothing. As God created Israel, Israel's relationship with God is a matter of the very greatest importance. The Lord is the source of Israel's life.

The Lord brought Israel into a position of plenty without assistance from any other god. Yet Israel, enjoying the prosperity and plenty that God brought him into, rejects the Lord for other gods, turning its back on the rock that bore them. The Lord responds to this provocation by hiding his presence from them and visiting judgment upon them by

another people.

If they left the Lord and turned to gods that were not gods, he will bring a people that's not a people against them. The result will be the devastating force of the curse falling upon Israel. It will destroy their land and its fruit.

They will experience famine, pestilence, plague, attacks from wild beasts, and war. In verses 26 and following, the Lord, however, stays his hand of judgment. His name is upon Israel and he doesn't want the nations he raised up against Israel to think that they achieved the victory over it, praising themselves, like Israel wrongly does, in their own strength.

The enemy doesn't understand the reason for their victory, that God had given up his people to them. This was the only way in which they could ever have won such dramatic and one-sided battles against Israel. Their gods are not as the God of Israel and their prosperity and seeming blessing is not the true blessing that Israel enjoys.

It seems like a true blessing but its reality is quite different. The time will come when the enemies that the Lord has raised up against Israel will themselves be destroyed and when that time comes the Lord himself will have compassion upon his people and will deliver them. All of the gods to which Israel turned will have been proved powerless and futile, unable to come to Israel's aid in this time of distress.

And this will serve to manifest the Lord's uniqueness. The point of the song here is similar to one found throughout the book of Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 41 verse 4. Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I the Lord, the first and with the last, I am he.

Isaiah 43 10 to 13. You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.

I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no saviour. I declared and saved and proclaimed when there was no strange god among you. And you are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and I am God.

Also henceforth I am he. There is none who can deliver from my hand. I work, and who can turn it back? Isaiah chapter 48 verse 12.

Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel whom I called. I am he, I am the first, and I am the last. The Lord is the great warrior, and no rival can stand against him.

His action in the history of Israel, seen against the record of their stubborn unfaithfulness, will lead to the glorification of his name. The heavens will rejoice at his victory. All gods will bow before him.

He defeats his enemies. He avenges his people. He brings about atonement.

He will finally and decisively deal with his people's sins, the sins that are described within this great song. Joshua joins Moses in presenting Israel with the song. Israel is counseled to take its words, and the words of the Lord to heart.

The words of the Lord are the very source of Israel's life. The life of Israel ultimately flows not from any material prosperity and plenty, but from the Lord and obedience to his word. Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

Deuteronomy chapter 8 verse 3. This chapter concludes with Moses being instructed to climb Mount Nebo, where he will be able to see the land before the people enter into it. He, however, will not enter in on account of his sin at Meribah Kadesh. A question to consider.

Verse 51 reads, You broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, and because you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel. How does this help us to better understand Moses' sin in Numbers chapter 20. Luke chapter 1 verses 39 to 56.

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, and why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy, and blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. And Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant, for behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed, for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name, and 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 mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of humble estate, he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty, he has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever. And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her home. The Spirit's overshadowing of Mary in Luke chapter 1 might draw our minds back to the cloud of the Spirit coming upon the tabernacle and the temple when they were dedicated.

It might also draw our minds forward to the event of Pentecost. It also helps us to

understand what comes next, as Mary, her womb, and her child are spoken of using temple imagery, and drawing upon stories of the temple from the Old Testament. Like Acts, Luke begins with the establishment of a new temple.

King David leapt and danced before the Ark of the Covenant as it was brought into Jerusalem in 2 Samuel chapter 6 verses 14-16, dressed in the garments of a child. As Mary, the new bearing God's presence, comes to Elizabeth, the infant forerunner John dances before Jesus, God's presence, just as David danced before the Ark, bringing the presence of the Lord into Jerusalem. Elizabeth speaks of Mary as the mother of her Lord, and the leaping of her baby is taken as a sign of the superiority of the one over the other.

And not just the superiority, but the interconnection between the two. These are two infants with a shared mission, intertwined destinies that will play out in the future. Elizabeth blesses Mary in much the same language as Jael is blessed in Judges chapter 5 verse 24, Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed.

Jael is famous for crushing the head of Holofernes, driving a tent peg through his temple. This would seem a strange story to recall in the context of meek Mary, and we might be inclined to discount the connection, but I don't think we should. In Genesis chapter 3 verse 15, enmity is placed between the woman and the serpent, and between their respective seeds, and we are told that the seed of the woman will crush the serpent's head.

Jael is an example of someone who crushes a tyrant's head, a serpent figure. And Mary is the mother of the promised seed, the one who will crush the serpent's head, and she, in her faithful response to the Lord, is instrumental in that crushing herself. Not only is she like Jael, she's also like Hannah.

The song that she later sings is like that of Hannah in 1 Samuel chapter 2 verse 10. Mary is cut from the same cloth as the great heroines from the Old Testament. She's continuing their story.

In the character of Mary we see a glimpse of many of the traits of the great heroines of the Old Testament. Mary stays with Elizabeth from the sixth to the ninth months of her pregnancy. Later in the gospel, darkness is over the land from the sixth to the ninth hours.

In Luke chapter 23 verse 44, there may be a connection between these two things. The parallels between Mary's Magnificat and the prayer of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, in 1 Samuel chapter 2 verses 1 to 10, are readily noticeable. And Hannah prayed and said, 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 await.

The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength. Those who are full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who are hungry have ceased to hunger. The barren has born seven, 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 and he 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 shall a man prevail.

The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces. Against them he will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth.

He will give strength to his king and establish the horn of his anointed. Mary is probably also drawing upon material such as Psalm 113 verses 7 to 9. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children.

Praise the Lord. This is the first of the cycle of the Psalms sung at the Passover, and there is a new exodus-style deliverance in the making here. The Magnificat is marked by the sort of parallelism that you find in Hebrew poetry.

In such poetry we'll usually see the juxtaposition of two lines, one which develops the thought of the one that went before. The Magnificat explores the contrast between the humility of Mary and the mightiness of the Lord. The Lord who can bring the mighty low and lift up those of poor degree is the one who looks upon the humble and the meek and the lowly of the earth and takes regard for them.

And the song which begins with Mary's own experience soon expands into the experience of Israel. What happens to Mary is exemplary for the whole people. The deliverance that she experiences will expand to a larger group.

Like the other songs and prophecies at the beginning of the book of Luke, it serves to sum up and characterize the larger mission that Jesus is about to engage in, in the gospel as a whole. With these other songs and prophecies and prayers it introduces the ministry of Christ and of John the Baptist with great themes of rejoicing and celebration and anticipation. An event that seems minor, the birth of a child, is seen to hold within it

the promise of the redemption of a people.

A seed of redemption is here germinating, a seed which will not truly pierce the surface of the earth until 30 years hence. God's great acts often have long gestation periods and what we see in the story of Mary and Elizabeth is that it begins in surprising places. It begins with the prayers of faithful women, not in the courts of kings.

This of course is in keeping with the theme of Mary's song, that the Lord, the mighty God, is the one who pays attention to the humble and the meek and the lowly of the earth. He's the God who turns the tables. Those who seem to be mighty and of great repute are those who are going to be brought low.

The rich are going to be impoverished and the poor are going to be lifted up. And all of this should be a sign to Israel itself. Israel, that is so often inclined to put its hope in the great leaders and rulers or to live in dread of them, can so easily forget that their God is a God who works with the meek and the lowly.

He's a God who hears their prayers. He's a God who acts on behalf of those who are neglected and oppressed and abandoned. There is no reason why they should be enthralled to the mighty of the world when the mighty one of Israel is on their side.

Mary, like Hannah before her, is an example also to those in Israel who might think of themselves as of little consequence. The Lord is not merely concerned with the affairs of kingdoms and nations. He pays attention to individuals, even those that no one else pays attention to.

A question to consider, why might the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary be significant?