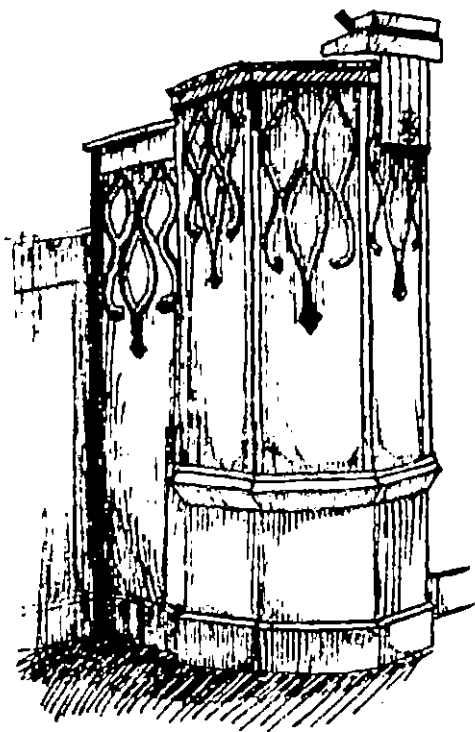


The Southminster Pulpit



"HE THAT IS MIGHTY"

**Text: "Fear not, Mary,
thou hast found favor
with God."**

Luke 1:30

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Rev. Richard M. Cromie

Southminster Presbyterian Church

Mount Lebanon, Pennsylvania

On the news broadcast yesterday at noon, I heard a report direct from that familiar sounding little town south of Jerusalem in the modern state of Israel. Like every other area of the Middle East these days, it, too, is on guard and at the ready. Sophisticated anti-aircraft weaponry is poised, loaded, and ready to fire. Soldiers stalk through the streets on guard for terrorists, whose ugly disregard for human life is a continuing anomaly in our frustrating, fearful modern world. People are nervous and jittery, and afraid to venture far from their homes. The town, of course, is Bethlehem, the same; and the commentator said that tourism this Christmas season has been cut in half: barely 5,000 visitors have registered for the nativity time. And worst of all, at the birthplace of our Lord heavily armed security guards are constantly on watch to protect the outdoor replica of the original stable, and, for safety's sake, live actors are not being used this year. People are afraid to make the journey to Bethlehem, afraid of what might happen should they be caught in the middle of the insanity of war. Oh, what a dismal day!

There was another time when a couple of people were afraid to go to Bethlehem. A decree had gone out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled, and each Jew was called home to the city of his birth. It was decreed that Joseph, of the House of David, should go to Bethlehem. The problem was that he didn't want to go. All kinds of orders came from Rome, and this one was the least convenient of all. (Oh

now, the more astute of you will know that there is some scholarly fuss around the edges of this story: like when and where the census took place in the time when Quirinius was Governor of Syria. Some say this, and others that - perhaps Luke had a slip of the pen. Most likely Sentius Saturnius was Governor when Christ was born. But what is certain is that some extraordinary demand took Joseph to Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King.)

Mary, his wife, was "great with child;" - that's the nice little King James' way of saying she was about to have a baby. It was ninety miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem: three days, at least, on the back of a donkey, up and down those rugged roadless hills, a long and arduous journey, sleeping in the cold damp of those Palestinian nights. Before leaving she would have had to bake bread enough for the time away, dry the meat, sack the lentils, gather water in the goatskins, pack the swaddling clothes and such other apparel and paraphernalia as was necessary for the journey. And, if Joseph was anything like the rest of us husbands, he probably missed the whole effort, for there were some "chores" to take care of in the carpentry shop. Poor Mary had to do it all alone.

En route there were no inns at all: just plop down on goatshair blankets in the open air. Great trip for Mary, dear, sweet, lovely, little Mary. It was to be her first child and she was just a young girl, probably late teens. Can't you imagine the fear racing through her body as, due to have a baby within hours, they came near to Bethlehem and there was no place to stay? I wonder if you have ever thought much, in all this Christmas story, about Mary. She needed some borrowed strength to see her through. When the

world was set on end and fear possessed her, she needed a certain strength and peace.

And, my friends, I think she found it in the music of the Magnificat and in the words of the angels who spoke to her from the first day she conceived this special child. Then, too, she was afraid - not meek and overpowered by the fear, but afraid. Every time the extraordinary crashes in upon us; we are afraid. Every time the eternal touches our temporality, somebody or other is afraid. So the angel said, "Fear not, fear not, Mary, thou hast found favour with God." ...Nothing else will matter now...

"Fear not," those words will find you when all your other dreams elude you. They put meaning into all the other things you do. They will transport you safely across the stormiest journeys you will encounter this year, or any other. They will sing in key with you at the peak and moment of your highest joy. Those words will remember when everyone else forgets. They will enliven your memory of the sacred and the best. They will surprise you when everything else is set, when you are in danger of settling in to take the world in stride, just as you always did, with no new zest for the years that lie ahead. Just when you begin to fail and falter and level off, then along comes Christmas.

Little, lovely Mary -- late teens or early twenties, the Scripture says, was "endued with Grace." Take it here not to mean that overpowering kind of dull, adoring, mysterious grace which hides in our theologies, though it is from God and has a certain mystery. Rather, take it now to mean as from the earth around us, a goodness in the life you see, real and earthy and so

touchable. I think it means that beautiful and lovely strength of mind and purity of soul, which goes to so few you know. That characteristic saintliness seen in eyes and felt in spirit, which you find only in a special two or three you'll meet before you're through. Mary: gentle, loving, patient, pondering, growing in confidence and inner beauty, as quiet and illuminating as the gift of light; one who has, above all, the gift of appreciation; trusting and trustworthy, confident yet changeable, eyes opened with windows into the very soul itself; and eyes that yet, like Nietzsche's god, see everything at once, missing nothing, expressive and expressing. One by whose grace and loveliness your own confidence and courage are renewed; one who seldom wavers and never is afraid to try new friends or thoughts, or both at once, and yet knows the endlessness of the tried and true; one aware of her own beauty and not ashamed to allow it to be seen by you. One who gains strength from others when she needs it..and gives it back when others do. One who is open to find the things she needs, and, aye, even as a little girl, you know the day will come when she will be accomplished; when, with the warm blood of every regal soul enlivening her strides, she will rise to reign over that finest of all the kingdoms of the world: the one of self, and of the soul. So attuned to holiness, complete and yet completing, and as an instant friend of God, the Scripture says it all by saying: "Little, lovely Mary was 'endued with Grace'."

And all along the road to Bethlehem, I think I can hear her remembering these words which she first sang to Elizabeth, her cousin, deep, deep words, like a deep, deep creek. Bach made them even lovelier in his music, but they are enough

within themselves.

My soul doth magnify the Lord
And my spirit hath rejoiced in
God, my Savior.
He hath regarded me,
He that is mighty hath done
great things for me.
His mercy is on those who fear him.
He hath put down the mighty
And hath exalted those of low degree.

Mary found her strength right there. He that is mighty hath done great things for me. And what is different about the might and the power that comes from Christ? It is a force that moves men's hearts and souls. It is a power that does not depend on authority or arms or crowds or ammunition. It is a might that persuades from within. Power that will never override your own self; it does not manipulate or coerce or cajole. It strikes no bargain. It does not demand, it does not decree. No one is shouting at you, no one screaming that you should be doing something you are not.

No, it really is very gentle, a quiet request, as quiet as the birth of light, and it leaves the answer up to you. No one can make you give your heart away...oh, they can command your body. A tyrant can control where you are allowed to go with your body, by billy clubs and guns and sticks and fists and stones and prison bars, and all the subtle economic and personal pressures in the world. But no one can imprison the free and reigning spirit of your soul. Against your will they can drag you away after whatever gods and idols they make, not only you and me but all the sons and daughters of men throughout

recorded history, shouting, screaming on their way to Belsen, or Auschwitz, or Buchenwald; or shivering with fear they went to face the lion in the sport of emperors, or into the tyranny of the acceptance which you need, using love as cold as steel. Hanging, crying, dying on a thousand thousand different burning crosses; earthquakes and airplane crashes, bosses and businesses, stocks and bonds and banks, suffocating families breaking up, disappointments, slowly spiriting downwards and taking you down with it. Oh, they can destroy the body. That power belongs to Time and Age, if no one else; But they cannot touch the soul. Not if you should choose to claim it for yourself!

He that is mighty hath done great things for me: has given me the gift of life and love, of memory and hope, of faith and strength and peace. Then and there I have everything I need. Big old Augustus Caesar had the power. People died because he didn't like the way they bowed their heads before him. Power, power, power - his was life and death, and when he died, they decided not to weep, for he was a god, and gods live on forever. But no one even knows his name.

So get up and go, my friend.....do not be afraid. Only one thing matters - - - you have found favor with God. He that is mighty, he who has the last word, had spoken it for you and me. That's the Magnificat: Magnifying from the furthestmost limits of your outer space into the hiddenmost limit of your inner self, the one essential might and life and gift you need: His power and His presence, in Christ, for now and ever more.

Amen.