

Sunday, December 23, 2012: Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

by [Thomas Daniel](#) in the [December 12, 2012](#) issue

Over the years I've taken part in some amazing celebrations. As a native Atlantan, I remember the moment in 1990 when we heard the announcement on the radio that the Summer Olympics were coming to our city. People began honking car horns and spontaneously hugging strangers in the streets. Five years later the Atlanta Braves won their first (and only) World Series title, and my friends and I stayed up all night toasting our champions. Then there was the moment when my wife and I learned that she was pregnant—after years of hearing that this was not likely to happen. Tears ran down our faces as we embraced one another.

Each of these examples reminds me that celebrations almost always take place after there's been a determination. Nobody popped that champagne cork for the Braves until they'd recorded the final out against the Cleveland Indians. It would have been premature to celebrate before the game was over. Similarly, my wife and I did not celebrate the end to years of infertility until we had a pregnancy test result that we could see with our own eyes.

The only celebration that seems different was waiting, as a young child, at the top of our family's staircase on Christmas morning. I'd stand with my two younger brothers and fidget with anticipation while my father turned on the Christmas tree lights and checked to see if Santa had bothered to leave us any presents. Even before he came back to report to us, however, my brothers and I would jump around excitedly, hugging one another and passing around high fives. Every year we knew without a doubt that the promise of gifts on Christmas morning was real. Before we'd seen a single gift, the celebration was already in full swing.

This staircase moment was unique because we were celebrating a promised future. I believe that Mary's statement, the Magnificat, is like that staircase celebration. All her life Mary and the Jewish people had lived under the brute force of Rome as well as the twisted hand of Herod the Great. Then, in a most unanticipated moment, Mary learned that she was pregnant and would become the virgin mother of the Messiah, a king whose reign would last forever. After taking time to digest this news, Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. As John

leapt in Elizabeth's womb at the presence of the unborn Jesus, Mary celebrated. "My soul magnifies the Lord," she began, and then composed a spontaneous song about the work of God that her child would usher into creation:

My spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

Surely this is a top-of-the-staircase celebratory declaration! Mary's words describe the longing she shared with her people. She sang of God's promised reign through her child as bringing about a day when God would "have brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." Mary was celebrating a promise that was as real as the miraculous baby growing in her belly—and as unrealized. She was being ushered into the mysterious realm of the "already and not yet."

It is a realm in which we still find ourselves today in the 21st century. Indeed, just as Caesar Augustus and Herod occupied positions of power when Mary broke out in a spontaneous moment of celebration, we live in an age when power rests in the hands of many who do not fully embrace the reign of God. From the slums of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to the ghettos of our urban landscapes, the poor and lowly continue to suffer, as do all of us in our places of unfulfilled dreams and unending loss. We all have unfulfilled dreams that have been destroyed. We all endure pain and betrayal that seem to rob us of any true experience of peace or joy. Yet in the midst of it all we have Mary's song, which is an Advent celebration because it exults in the present and future promise of God's eternal reign. It is a reign where our broken places are transformed:

He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

This is God's promise to us all. Thus, no matter what pain you have seen or experienced, may you join with Mary in celebrating the reign of Jesus that both is coming and has come. May we all, like children on Christmas morning poised to descend the staircase, enter into an unbridled celebration with full knowledge and assurance that God's victory in Jesus has already been won.