

The Praise of New Beginnings: The Infancy Hymns in Luke

Gail R. O'Day

Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, Georgia

Advent marks the beginning of the Christian new year. It is neither an extension of nor appendage to Christmas, but is a vital season in its own right. The church does not count time from school year to school year, from January 1 to January 1, but from Advent to Advent. It is one of the wonders of our faith that our liturgical calendar helps us to enact the theological realities of our lives as Christians. The season of Advent reminds us that we are not fated to old lives and old patterns, but that God regularly offers us the chance to begin again. Advent reminds us that our futures are not closed, not bound by the restrictions of more of the same, but are open to a fresh infusion of grace. Advent thus celebrates the possibilities of new beginnings.

The Advent season also rekindles our expectancy and hope for God's presence among us. We do not hope simply for the romantic, lyrical birth of a baby in a manger, but we hope for God's decisive entry into the world. Advent announces that yet again our lives can begin anew, that once more we have the chance to welcome the arrival of God. We know that God will come to us because God has come to us before, and our confidence in the faithfulness of God fills us with hope for the possibilities of the future. We trust the promises of Advent because we trust the promises of God. Each Advent we are reminded that the future is always open, that God's promises are ever new, that God's coming to us is ever imminent.

The songs in the infancy narrative in Luke capture the expectancy and hope in new beginnings that lie at the heart of Advent. The songs of Mary (Luke 1:46-55), Zechariah (Luke 1:67-79), and Simeon (Luke 2:29-32) all celebrate the power of God to create a new future out of the threads of the past and present. As we examine these songs, we shall see that each of the three singers stands at a point of new beginning, each shares in the graciousness of God's transforming promises. Each was surprised by the advent of God into their lives and their world, and each has embraced that advent and the new possibilities it offers. Each of the singers sings praise to God in thanksgiving for God's faithfulness to God's promises. God has given them new life and fresh hope, and their songs are the gifts they return to God. These singers and their songs can teach us how to celebrate the new beginnings offered us in Advent.

I

The first song in the Lukan infancy narrative is Mary's song, the

Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55).¹ The immediate occasion for Mary's song is her visit to her cousin Elizabeth (1:39:45). The interrelationship of these two women's stories is important for understanding Mary's song. Both women have found favor with God (1:25, 28, 30) and have received the gift of a child. The patterns of their lives are the inverse of one another, however. Elizabeth has waited her whole life for a child, but her womb has remained barren and she and her husband Zechariah are now advanced in years. Elizabeth stands in the line of our mothers Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah, the great mothers of our faith who had their barren hopelessness transformed by God into fertile new possibilities. Elizabeth's lifelong prayers have been answered by God's gift of the child in her womb. Elizabeth's pregnancy carries God's life-giving promises forward from the story of Israel to the story of Jesus.

While Elizabeth's story is familiar to us from the stories of the Old Testament, Mary's story takes us in a new direction. She has not waited her whole life for a child. On the contrary, she is just entering into her childbearing years. She is engaged to Joseph but not yet married (1:27). As a soon to be young bride, she will then become a young mother. Her life is not burdened by the pain of barrenness, by years of childless despair. The gift of God that comes to this young woman turns conventional domestic patterns and expectations on their head, while at the same time inverting the pattern of barrenness and faithfulness that we know from the Old Testament. The great mother of the new story initiates a new paradigm of promise and hope. God enters her experience with a promise that is not even on the horizon of her hopes, and Mary responds with the "yes" of faith (1:38; cf. 2 Cor. 1:19).

God gives Elizabeth that for which she has always yearned, but had long since despaired of receiving. God gives Mary that which she could never imagine in even her most daring moments (1:34). A new beginning for old life, a new beginning for young life: no one stands outside the transforming power of God. The God of Elizabeth and Mary heals old hurts and opens new futures.

These two women thus find themselves at decisive new beginnings occasioned by the advent of God. The meeting between them is a holy moment infused with God's presence. This presence is so tangible that the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy at the sound of Mary's voice (1:44). Elizabeth blesses Mary (1:42-45) and Mary responds by returning the blessing to God in her hymn of praise.

Mary's hymn can be divided into two parts: vv. 46-50 and vv. 51-55. The first part of the hymn (vv.46-50) is characterized by the first person singular: "my soul," "my spirit," "my Savior" (v.47); "all generations will call me blessed" (v.48); "the Mighty One has done great things for me" (v.49). Mary's own situation thus evokes her praise of God. Yet Mary's first person singular here is not private. Mary's opening praise in v.47 is a direct echo of Hannah's opening praise in 1 Samuel 2:1. The same words that praised God's gift of deliverance from barrenness now praise God for a radically new gift. When Mary sings Hannah's words, she places her personal experience in the broader context of her faith tradition. As radically new as God's action toward Mary is, it has a place in the ongoing story of Israel. Mary and Hannah praise the same God, and so Mary adds her voice to the familiar song.²

In keeping with the hymnic tradition of her faith, Mary next supplies the motives for her praise ("for," vv. 48, 49). Mary's first reason for praise is that God has looked with favor on the low estate of God's servant (v.48). "Low estate" or "lowliness" is not a synonym for humility, but refers to the lowliness of Mary's social location. She is a person with neither social qualifications nor a noble pedigree, a nobody. In God's eyes, however, she is somebody, and God's vision of her will now be shared by future generations (v.48b).

The second reason for praise is given in v.49. Mary still speaks of what God has done for her, but the language shifts slightly. The language of v.49 recalls descriptions of God's actions in the Exodus (Deut. 10:21). These echoes will become even more explicit in the second part of the hymn. The first part of the hymn then closes with praise of some of God's attributes: God's power, holiness, and mercy (v.50).

The focus of the hymn shifts in the second part. First, the focus shifts from Mary's personal experience of God to Israel's experience of God. Second, the focus shifts from God's attributes to God's actions. Adjectives and nouns about God give way to verbs.

Verses 51-55 continue to echo Hannah's song (cf. 1 Sam. 2:4-9). They also contain explicit Exodus imagery ("God has shown strength with God's arm," v.51; cf. Exod. 6:1, Deut. 3:24). Mary's recital of God's history with God's people is a history of power reversals, of inversions in social order caused by the advent of God. Those who abuse power are brought low, those who have nothing are filled and lifted up. God's action toward the lowly Mary (v.48) fits with God's characteristic actions toward the lowly (v.52). Mary celebrates a God who has acted decisively for the deliverance of God's people. The verbs of vv.51-53 give flesh to the attributes of power, holiness, and mercy.

Verses 51-55 are all in the past tense, but they convey a vision of God's future actions. Future generations are mentioned in vv.48, 50, 55, thus suggesting that God's faithfulness to God's promises in the past is the guarantee for God's faithfulness to God's promises for the future. Mary's praise of who God has been gives renewed confidence in who God will be. She sings of her present in the language of the past as an act of trust in the future. Mary's hymn thus signals the shape of the new beginning that will be inaugurated by the child in her womb.

II

The second infancy hymn is Zechariah's song, the *Benedictus* (Luke 1:67-79). Zechariah offers an interesting contrast to Mary. Zechariah and Mary each receive an annunciation of the birth of a child (1:8-20, 26-38), but their responses differ dramatically. Mary, as discussed above, responds to Gabriel's news with the "yes" of faith (1:38). Zechariah's response to Gabriel's news, however, is more like the initial responses of Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 17:17, 18:12): questioning and disbelief. All the years of waiting in vain for a child overwhelm Zechariah's belief in the possibilities of God. Zechariah's disbelief leads directly to his muteness: if he cannot speak words of faith, he will speak no words at all until the birth promised by God occurs (1:20-23).

The promised child is born to Zechariah and Elizabeth (1:57), a sign of the great mercy of God that can transform our present reality (1:58). True to Gabriel's word, when the baby was born, Zechariah's "mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God" (1:64). Words of faith roll off his tongue now.

When Zechariah speaks, the difference between him and Mary diminish and the similarities increase. Zechariah's song, like Mary's song, celebrates the new beginning wrought by the advent of God. Like Mary's song, Zechariah's song also uses the language and images of his faith tradition to articulate the vision and promise of the future.

Zechariah's song divides into two parts, vv. 67-75 and vv. 76-79. Zechariah begins by singing God's praise for all God has done in Israel's history (vv.67-75). He then moves to what God has done in the birth of John the Baptist (vv.76-79). Zechariah's song is thus the mirror image of Mary's song, which opens with Mary's situation and moves to Israel.

The language of vv.67-75 draws together all of Israel's life with God. Verse 68 recalls God's deliverance of Israel in the Exodus (cf. Exod. 4:31). Verse 69 makes explicit mention of the house of David and the royal promises. Verse 70 cites the witness of the prophets, and the first section ends with a reference to Abraham (v.73). God's history with Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets is reason for praise ("for," v.68).

Verses 73-75 sound the same note as the end of the Magnificat. Zechariah recites Israel's history as a sign of God's mercy and faithfulness to God's promises. It is not enough to say God is merciful and trustworthy, because God cannot be contained by adjectives and nouns. The verbs of God's actions again predominate in this hymn, making concrete the stories for which Zechariah praises God.

At v.76 the focus shifts from God's actions with Israel in the past to God's actions in the present and future. What this hymn celebrates of God in the past will continue to shape the future. God's mercy will be renewed. God's deliverance will continue as God brings God's people out of darkness into light and sets them in "the way of peace" (v.78).

Zechariah sings an old, old song, a song of covenant promises, of Exodus deliverance, of prophets and kings. But he also sings a new song in which he envisions the dawning of a new day (v.78). The birth of John the Baptist is a moment of new beginning in the story of God and God's people (vv. 76-77). Zechariah sings praises to the God who has brought God's people this far and who promises to lead them on.

God came to an old man who had long since despaired of having a child and gave him and his wife a son. The wonder and power of God's act in that gift freed Zechariah's tongue to praise the graciousness of God. An old man who thought that he knew the full range of possibilities for his life is surprised by the advent of God. With a renewed life and renewed faith, he sings of the surprising possibilities that await the world because of this advent of God.

III

The third infancy hymn is sung by Simeon (the *Nunc Dimittis*, Luke 2:29-32). Simeon's role in the infancy narrative is different from that of Mary and Zechariah. Mary and Zechariah have an intimate relationship to this story; the history of God with God's people is being played out in their families, with their children. Simeon, by contrast, is the representative of God's people. Mary and Zechariah sing of Israel's story; Simeon embodies that story. He is faithful Israel, waiting for the advent of God. The language with which Simeon is introduced in 2:25-26 underscores this. He is "righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel" (v.25). He has received the Holy Spirit and attends faithfully to its guidance (v.26). Simeon's personal future ("would not see death") is linked to Israel's future ("before he had seen the Lord's Messiah")(v.26).

The Holy Spirit leads Simeon into the temple, and there he sees what God has promised he would see; the Messiah (2:27). Like Mary and Zechariah, God's advent into the world evokes a hymn of praise from Simeon (2:28). Simeon's hymn (2:29-32) celebrates God's faithfulness to God's promises. God had promised that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah, and God has held true to that promise (v.29b). In response, Simeon acknowledges that he is now able to depart in peace (v.29a), because he has indeed seen God's salvation (v.30).

Simeon has confidence about the ending of his life because he has seen the new beginning of life for the world. God's Messiah brings God's promised salvation to Israel (vv.25, 32a) and to the Gentiles (v.32a). God's presence is available to "all peoples" (v.31). Simeon has waited for God's advent longer than anyone in the infancy narrative. He is the people Israel, he is God's faithful servant, and he has waited long to see what shape God's inbreaking will take. The new beginning that he sees transcends his own life. He is at peace because he knows that all the world is held by the promises of God.

IV

Simeon's song is the most intimate and personal of all the infancy songs. Its subject matter is God's salvation of the world, but Simeon's life is so closely tied to the future of God's people that the joy at God's advent can be most powerfully expressed in one's man yearning to die in the full presence of God. This is how it always is with the advent of God into the world: God's cosmic promises change the shapes of lives of individuals. The vivid image of Luke 2:28 combines both the intimacy and the breadth of God's advent. One man holds one baby and sees the future of the world.

One young mother, one old father, one holy man—each has experienced the advent of God and has embraced it with joy. Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon all have tasted the faithfulness of God that makes all things possible and new. Their songs bring those possibilities into our present and open the way to our future as we look to the advent of God.

Notes

¹The infancy hymns receive their titles from the Latin of their first words.

²See Gail R. O'Day, "Singing Woman's Song: A Hermeneutic of Liberation," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 12 (1985) 203-10