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Mary, Mother of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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“An Old Adage; a New Twist”
Text: Luke 1:46-55; Galatians 4:4-7

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The old adage “God helps those who help themselves” is well ingrained in the minds of most Americans, probably because Benjamin Franklin printed it in his popular *Poor Richard's Almanack*. It is a phrase that quickly became well-known and widely believed – not only because Franklin printed it – but because it fits in well with the understandings of independence and freedom and liberty upon which our nation was founded. It goes along with what we want to be true – that if we do our best and try our hardest, God will reward our effort and dedication with His help and support, so that we will assuredly either *achieve* or *receive* what we have been working for. And most people believe that phrase to be true because they think it is Biblical, since it mentions God after all. Maybe it's in the book of Proverbs or something.

But in the Holy Gospel, we heard quite a *different* word from God. We heard, in fact, the very opposite – that God helps those who cannot help themselves. In the words of Mary in the Holy Gospel, after Jesus was conceived in her womb, we hear that God *scatters* the proud, *brings down* the mighty, and *sends away* the rich . . . while He *exalts* the humble, *fills* the hungry, and *remembers* those that others have forgotten. Or in other words, He gives mercy, not rewards. He blesses those the world curses. And He looks with favor on those who rely and trust in Him and not on themselves. Benjamin Franklin was smart in a lot of ways, but he was a lousy theologian.

Because really, “helping ourselves” has been our problem all along. Oh, not that it's wrong to take care of ourselves and get what we need for this body and life. That's good stewardship of the life God has given us. What I mean is when we “help ourselves” to those things we shouldn't have; when we “help ourselves” to sin. The devil is very good at holding things before us and saying “help yourself!” And far too often, we listen. Like when Eve helped herself to the fruit she wasn't to eat of. When Jacob helped himself to his brother Esau's blessing and birthright. When Joseph's brothers helped themselves to Joseph's coat of many colors. When David helped himself to his neighbor's wife, Bathsheba.

And so too it goes in our day and age. Many helping themselves to sexual pleasures of all kinds. Helping themselves to the lives of the unborn. Helping themselves to the possessions of others through deception and fraud and even legalized means. . . . But lest we only accuse others, know that we do it, too. Helping ourselves to what belongs to God, when we take the credit for what belongs only to Him. Helping ourselves to what belongs to our neighbor. Oh, perhaps we are not so obvious as to break into his house or yard or things like that, but do we take our neighbor's honor and reputation through gossip? Do we take his joy and satisfaction through harsh and unkind words? Do we take away her friendship by taking revenge? Do we take his health by making his life bitter and stressful? Do we take her modesty by lusting? Do we take away his position by turning others against him? And why do we "help ourselves" to these things if not to have them for our own? . . . "Help yourself!" That is, in fact, what could be called the devil's motto, and words that he *wants* us to live by. For he knows that in the end, they will be the words that we die by.

And so when God gave His commandments, it was to get us to do and think and live exactly the opposite of this. It was to change our direction and focus away from ourselves and turn us out to those around us. For God wants us not to help ourselves, but to help and serve our neighbor. And so in his explanation of the commandments, Luther spells out this change of direction and focus. Instead of helping ourselves, we are to honor, serve and obey, love and cherish our parents and other authorities; we are to help and support our neighbor in every physical need; we are to love and cherish our spouse; we are to help our neighbor improve and protect his possessions and income; we are to defend and speak well of our neighbor, and explain everything in the kindest way; we are to help our neighbor keep his inheritance and house; we are to encourage those who belong to our neighbor to stay and do their duty. In short, we are to be focused not on ourselves, but on others. Not selfish, but serving. Yet as we help ourselves to whatever we want, this is exactly what we are not. And therefore as we help ourselves, we should not expect God's *help*; we should rather expect what we confessed earlier – His punishment, now and forever. For this is what we justly have deserved.

But then when we get to this point – this point of conviction; this point of the realization of our sin – we find out that this old adage was true after all! (Just not in the way that ol' Ben Franklin meant it.) For, in fact, God did help those who have helped themselves! For He sent His Son. For as we heard, "***when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law . . .***" Under the law. That's us. We are under the *obligation* of the law, to fulfill it perfectly. Under the *burden* of the law, for it is a requirement that weighs heavy on us. And we are under the *condemnation* of the law, because we have not kept it. And so God

helped those who helped themselves. He came and fulfilled the law perfectly in our place. He came and carried the burden of the law for us. He came and allowed Himself to be condemned to the cross in our place. To rescue, redeem, and free us who were being crushed by the law, and grant us His forgiveness.

That forgiveness was earned for us when, ironically, Jesus did not help Himself. When He did not help Himself by avoiding arrest, or by refuting His opponents, or by jumping down from the cross. He could have. Easily. He was the One who was without sin; the *only* One. But He didn't help Himself. He came to help us. And so He took our sins, every last one of 'em, big and small. Our selfishness, our rebellion, our sins that we do just because we like to do 'em . . . how embarrassing would it be if everyone knew all your sins? Well, no one ever will, because Jesus took them away. You know how some people say they have secrets that they will take to their grave? Well that's what Jesus did. He took all of our sins, all of our secrets, all of our guilt and shame to the grave with Him, and left it all there. For when He rose on Easter morning, all that was gone. . . . This is God's Son, whom the Father declared at His baptism, at His transfiguration, and at His resurrection, that ***"with Him I am well-pleased."***

And those are the words that our Heavenly Father now speaks of us as well. Not because we no longer sin – you know *that's* not true! But because we have now been adopted as sons of God in Jesus. That's what the rest of the Epistle said; that's why Jesus came: ***"to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God."***

Did you notice all the "gift language" in those words? Not only *redeem*, but *adoption*, and *heir*. Those words tell us that our Heavenly Father *wants* us as His children, and He *wants* to give us His kingdom. And those things are ours not because we help ourselves, but as we simply receive them by grace through faith in our Saviour Jesus. As we stop trying to help and save ourselves, and instead turn to His cross in repentance. For as we slaves of sin die in repentance, we are raised with Jesus in forgiveness as sons of God. And so every week as we gather here we don't bring with us all the good things we think we have done and try to show God how proud He should be of us! No, we bring our sin, our guilt, our burdens, and our shame, and repent. And in exchange, we receive His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. We take our place at His Table to be fed by His body and blood. And He says, ***"You are my son, with you I am well-pleased."***

And thus graced and gifted by these words and honor which we surely do not deserve, we leave this place and begin to serve our neighbor. And the order is important! We are not

pleasing to God because we have done so – rather, we do so, because God has forgiven us, made us His sons, and declared that He is pleased with us *before* we have done anything! God always acts first. We simply respond to His love and forgiveness. We simply speak what we have been given to speak, give what we have been given to give, and love and forgive with the love and forgiveness He has given us.

And that brings us back to Mary and her words in the Holy Gospel. You might have been wondering why I haven't been talking about her – for this is the day of her commemoration, after all. But as Luther once remarked, we do Mary no greater honor than when we talk about and believe in her son. For this is indeed what Mary did. The Magnificat is not about her, but about her Son. It is Mary's *response* to what God has done, in sending His Son to be our Saviour. To be her Saviour. She was not worthy, but in this child she now was carrying, she was blessed. . . . And her story is our story. We are not worthy, but in this One, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified, dead, buried, and risen, we are blessed. For what else does it mean to be blessed than to receive the gifts that our Saviour came to provide for us?

And so Mary's words are our words, as I *slightly paraphrase* . . .

***“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . . why?
for He has helped those who have helped themselves to sin,
and so cannot help themselves,
in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.