

Magnify the Lord Luke 1:39-56

“My soul magnifies the Lord.”

With those words Mary begins the wonderful song of faith and praise, that has come to be known as the Magnificat, which is the Latin word for magnify.

My soul magnifies the Lord. What do you suppose it means though to magnify the Lord in your soul? One definition of magnify is to praise someone or declare the greatness of someone. So, to magnify the Lord with our soul means that we declare God's greatness, with our very being. Which makes sense, because in the verses of the Magnificat, Mary goes on to joyfully offer high praises to God.

It has not escaped the notice of Biblical scholars that the Magnificat bears a striking resemblance to something called the Song of Hannah in the Old Testament Book of 1 Samuel. Hannah also gave birth to a noteworthy person under very unusual circumstances. She brought the prophet Samuel into the world, but only after her years of infertility were reversed by God's answer to her desperate prayer for a son.

It is thought that in writing his gospel, Luke put Hannah's song of Thanksgiving, on Mary's lips. But even if that is accurate, it doesn't take anything away from the originality of Mary's Magnificat. Because Hannah's song is Mary song, and Mary song is our song. If Mary's words echo those of Hannah, it is only because through Mary, the latest chapter of a story that was bigger than either of them was being written. A shared story of God working out the redemption of humankind through the most improbable agents and the most implausible methods.

Mary's story is interwoven with that of another Hannah, like character, Mary's cousin Elizabeth. Now, Elizabeth was--in the words of her husband Zechariah--getting on in years without ever conceiving a child. In a culture where women were valued primarily for their ability to bear children, a barren woman was looked upon as a failure.

Then God blessed, Elizabeth, with a very special pregnancy. For the child she carried would grow up to be John the Baptist. This was a time of great joy for

Elizabeth, a time of hope, fulfilled and prayers answered. Elizabeth's cousin Mary, on the other hand, was a very young girl. Probably a teenager. She was only recently engaged to Joseph when...well, we all know the story, don't we? How the angel announced that Mary would conceive a child born of the Holy Spirit, who would be named Jesus. But whereas Elizabeth's good fortune would be celebrated in public, Mary's pregnancy--when she had never had relations with Joseph--would brand her as an adulteress. And adulteresses were subject to being stoned to death under the law.

So, we have these two women. One whose shame was coming to an end. And the other whose disgrace might be just about to begin. No wonder it says that Mary went with haste to Elizabeth's home in the Judean countryside. Maybe Mary came to Elizabeth seeking the safety of seclusion from the public eye, and to receive comfort and assurance from her older relative. For her part, Elizabeth calls Mary blessed and praises Mary's faith in God. Elizabeth didn't look at Mary and see a kid in trouble. She saw someone who also was connected to God's purposes, just as she was. When Mary entered into Elizabeth's house even the child in Elizabeth's womb recognized her. Elizabeth felt him leap for joy within her.

And I believe that says something else about what it means to magnify the Lord. In the course of my visits to people in their homes I occasionally notice a magnifying glass on a table or near an open book. These are people whose eyesight has deteriorated to the point where it is difficult for them to read words printed on a page. But a magnifying glass helps them to see what their own eyes are incapable of revealing to them. You don't look at a magnifying glass so much as you look through it. The glass itself is transparent, but it makes whatever is on the other side of it larger, and clearer.

Isn't that what Mary does in her song? The Magnificat doesn't shout, "Look at me. God picked me to be the mother of the Savior." Instead, it rejoices over what this miraculous birth will set in motion. Mary sings about the scattering of the proud and the bringing down of the powerful from their thrones. She sings about the lifting up of the lowly and the filling of the hungry with good things. And if you notice, she sings about these things in the past tense, as if they've already happened.

Well, in a sense, they already had. Israel's history bore witness, through scripture, to God's faithful pursuit of justice. But in Jesus, the scope of God's influence will be magnified beyond the people of Israel to include all the peoples of the earth. The great reversals of fortune that Mary sings about were already plain to see in her own personal circumstances, for she herself was lowly and had been lifted up. She was hungry and was filled with good things. Mary understood that she was a part of the great river of God's mercy that made up Israel's past and humanity's future.

Mary magnifies the Lord, not in spite of, but precisely because of her miraculous but troubling situation. She magnifies the Lord. Because of that, God magnifies her faith for us to see it clearly, so that it serves as a model for the generations of women and men to follow. God works through her faith to magnify this lowly handmaid so that she can magnify the Lord. Mary sings her Magnificat and, in her singing, she becomes the first disciple of a son and a savior, who was yet to be born. She is the first to hear the announcement that God is with us--Emmanuel. And the very first to believe the announcement.

Protestants do not venerate Mary as our Roman Catholic friends do. But we too can learn from her what it is to declare God's greatness with our lives. As Martin Luther once said in a Christmas sermon, three miracles occurred at Christ's Nativity.

God became human.

A virgin conceived.

Mary believed.

For Luther, the greatest miracle of that first Christmas was the last of these.

Mary believed.

Despite all the world's oppression injustice and death, she believed. We who claim to follow Mary's Son Jesus are invited to believe, as well. And to sing *our* lives like verses in the great song of redemption that they are. *We* are called to magnify the Lord to others through our participation in the great story.

It matters less whether the words of the Magnificat were written to describe the experience of Hannah or Mary, so much as that they were written for you and for me. Each of us have lives that are pregnant with something or another, that God is desiring to bring to birth in us and through us. We are all called to magnify the Lord with our lives. No matter how rich or poor; how old or young we may be.

Mary was a lowly, dirt poor peasant girl, to whom God whispered through the lips of an angel. Elizabeth enjoyed the privilege that came with being the wife of a Temple priest. Elizabeth was supposedly old and barren. Mary was just a child. Together, they shared a bond, not only of expectant motherhood, but of expected miracle hood. Elizabeth's strength seems to have been her hope, a hope that didn't let her abandon her dream of bearing at least one child. A child who would be dedicated to serving God.

Mary's gift was her faith. A faith that allowed her to surrender herself totally to God's will, that she would bear a son who would show the world clearly and definitively, what God is like. It was a faith that spoke of the great things God would accomplish through her child, as if they had already occurred.

God still does some of his best work through unremarkable people whose potential for significance are dismissed by the world as impossible. What could Mary have possibly had to offer God, aside from her faithful heart, and the physical capability to bear a child? But she heard and responded and through her life, and the life she brought into the world, helped people whose spiritual vision was weak, to see the glory of God.

Mary's song is a timeless tune. It was the song of her ancestors who trusted God; magnifiers of the Lord such as they were. It is our song today, when we trust in God's Son. Christmas should remind us not only of the birth of Jesus, but of the eternal song of justice for all people that Mary perceived, and which Jesus lived and died to bring to the world.

At Christmas, may your souls rejoice, and may your joy be found in magnifying God by declaring God's greatness. May the Christ child be born anew in our hearts, so that his words and his works will continue on through us.

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