

MY SOUL MAGNIFIES THE LORD

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Text: Luke 1:39-55

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and 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. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 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."

"My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God." Today we hear the Magnificat, the song Mary sings when she's pregnant with Jesus and goes to see her cousin, Elizabeth, who's pregnant with John the Baptist. It's a moment of affirmation for Mary—God has chosen her, a nobody, to play a special role in the divine drama that's unfolding, and she responds with a song of praise and gratitude.

But the words I just read to you aren't from the Magnificat. They're not even from the New Testament. They're from 1 Samuel in the Old Testament, and they're sung by Hannah, another nobody God chooses to play a special role—in this case giving birth to Samuel, the great priest and prophet who anointed Israel's first king.

Hannah is unable to have children because, according to the story, "The Lord had closed her womb." But she prays to God and promises that if God gives her a son, she'll dedicate him to be a priest, which is exactly what happens. She conceives and bears a

son, and as soon he's weaned, she takes him to the temple and leaves him there with the old priest, Eli. Then she sings her own song of praise and gratitude, which becomes the model for Mary's song.

And you can certainly see the resemblances. In both songs, the mighty are laid low, the lowly are raised up, and God is active in the world, all of which is the opposite of what we generally expect. We expect the mighty to be the ones on top, and the lowly to be the ones scraping bottom, and God to be mostly sitting on the sidelines, watching the world turn, and not getting too involved.

So Mary's song and Hannah's song both give us a glimpse of life "seen through the looking-glass"—a glimpse of life where everything's upside-down. Which is actually right where we want to be on the fourth and final Sunday of Advent. Advent gets us ready for Christmas, when our expectations really get turned on their head.

The Christmas story starts out with the world as we know it—cold and dark and uncaring. A young pregnant couple with no money is turned away from shelter and sent back into the night, which is sad but not unusual. It's the kind of thing that happens everyday. Go down to the local family crisis center, and I guarantee you'll find people in situations that are just as desperate. But then the unexpected happens. God becomes active in the world. God becomes incarnate, enfleshed, one of us, and that changes everything. It turns Mary and Joseph's distress into joy, and it fulfills Mary's longing. God has not abandoned her. God has blessed her and looked on her with favor.

It's a wonderful, surprising, encouraging story. But here's a question for you: How did God's blessing and favor spread beyond the manger? How did it touch the lives of more than just two people? How did it get from the little town of Bethlehem all the way to the little town of Brookfield and everywhere in between? I think the answer is right here in this reading.

We love to sing about God's works at Christmastime. We love to sing about God coming into the world, bringing light into the darkness. But Mary's song is different than the carols we sing. Mary's song can be heard as an invitation to sing along with her and magnify the Lord just like she did.

And it doesn't even take that much effort. Like a magnifying glass makes the words bigger and sharper and clearer when we hold it over the page, we make God bigger and sharper and clearer when we follow God's ways and live good lives and do what's right. When we have compassion, when we show mercy, when we offer forgiveness, when we make peace, when we establish justice, and when we do these things in response to God's love, we bring God's heart into focus and make it visible in the world, so people can see who God is and come to know God's love for themselves.

That's how the favor of the Lord spreads, that's how it touches more and more lives, and that's how it fills the earth—through you and me and all of us together; individually and collectively; one small act of kindness at a time; by words of faith and hope and healing; in moments of crisis and desperation; with humility and respect and understanding.

So we all have a special role to play in the divine drama that's ongoing—no matter who we are, and no matter where we come from. That's the take-away for me this morning. We all magnify God with our actions—even if we're a nobody. Mary's a nobody, and so is Hannah, and yet God uses both of them to bring God's vision of life into being.

God seems to have a soft spot for the unexceptional and the ordinary. Whenever God wants to do something, it seems like that's who God chooses—people who don't stand out in any particular way, other than their ability to put their trust in God, believe in the world that God is bringing, and live as if that world is already here.

And that's what I love about Christmas. The presents are nice. The decorations are nice. The carols are nice. The cookies are nice. But I love the fact that Christmas not only gives me a glimpse of **life** seen through the looking-glass, but it also gives me a glimpse of **myself** seen through the looking-glass, and what I see there is not what I expect.

The Jason I know, the Jason I live with every day, is someone whose life is pretty mundane and inconsequential. He gets up every morning, makes a pot of coffee, sits on the couch reading the news, and then gets on with his day, knowing that nothing he'll do, nothing he'll accomplish, will matter all that much in the grand scheme of things. It's a big world, and he's just one little person. What difference can he possibly make?

But the Jason I see in that glimpse is someone who can reveal God's nature just by being generous, someone who can further God's kingdom just by lending a hand, someone who can share God's grace just by living his faith. So everything he does, no matter how small and seemingly unimportant, when it's done out of love, has a greater meaning. It's part of a purpose that goes far beyond his individual life, and it connects him to every life around him.

And he's not the only one. All of us have the same power and the same potential. And together we can do even more. We may be just one little church in a great big world, but we can magnify God with the work we do as a community. We can bring God's heart into focus and make it visible here in Brookfield and beyond, so people can see who God is and come to know God's love for themselves.

Thanks be to God, and merry Christmas.