

Magnification
A Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – Dec. 19, 2021

Please Read:
Micah 5:2-5a
Luke 1:46-55

Did you see the news that the James Webb Space Telescope is scheduled for launch on Christmas Eve? It's supposed to be 100 times more powerful than the Hubble and will change how we see the universe!

In our gospel text today, Luke invites us to explore the mysteries of magnification. Mary did not have a microscope or telescope to fascinate her. A different sort of magnification shows up in the story of Jesus's birth. Mary had become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. I don't understand that physiology any more than you do, but it's Luke's way of saying that the birth of Jesus is a mystery of God. Mary went to visit her relative Elizabeth, who was also supernaturally pregnant with John the Baptist... The relationship is not clear, as the Greek word, *suggenis*, which Luke uses to describe their relationship, just means relative... The importance here, is that John the Baptist and Jesus are related, and their relationship of course, as they grow up, will magnify in importance, both spiritually and politically.

About six months into her pregnancy, Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, and upon her arrival, Elizabeth blessed her and "the fruit of her womb." In response, Mary breaks into song, a song of praise in this way: "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" (Luke 1:46-49).

I'm struck by two things here. First of all, that Mary understands this is an historic moment. Not just that her life is changed, although it is. But that the whole world will be changed, indeed the whole universe will be changed through what is transpiring in and through her. *God is being born in her*. We Protestants are a little wary of Mary, but the Roman church has it correct that Mary is "theotokos," or the "Mother of God." Mary brings the incarnation of God so that we can experience Emmanuel, God with us.

And so secondly, Mary is rightly amazed and awed. Mary exclaims: "My soul magnifies the Lord" (Luke 1:46). That's a reasonable translation of the Greek verb, *megalunō*, which means "to make larger," or "to exalt, or glorify." Of course, the first meaning doesn't fit here. Mary cannot make God any larger even through her praise. But she did cause God to be held in higher esteem (by Elizabeth) through glorifying God. Mary's psalm is often called the Magnificat, which is the first word in the Latin translation: *magnificat anima mea Dominum*, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

The Magnificat echoes certain passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. Psalm 34:3, for example, reads, "O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt God's name together." Or perhaps even more relevant is the prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2. After God blessed her with a child, she prays, "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God" (1 Samuel 2:1). Mary echoes several themes from Hannah's prayer.

Mary magnifies or praises and exalts God for who God is. She praises God because God magnifies the little things, the little people, the forgotten causes and the powerless. That's what Mary sings about in her Christmas canticle. God specializes in lost causes. God lifts up the lowly. God feeds the hungry. God helps Israel, the name of a people that literally means "those who struggle with God." Mary alludes to the Exodus, and Bethlehem, referred to in our Micah text as "one of the little clans." Mary foreshadows Calvary. The upper room. The empty tomb.

Because God's Word which has surprised so many people of the past, both faithful and unfaithful alike, is also God's Word for us today, there is hope for God to intrude again and magnify us, lift us up, call us out, bring us into the new world of liberation - even in circumstances of the worst broken-heartedness, captivity, imprisonment, and mourning...

Mary's world was turned upside down because of a surprising intrusion by God. If you glance back a few verses, the angel Gabriel brought Mary God's word. Mary receives and believes that Word as a promise. She yields herself to the Word. But Mary has nothing to go on but the radical promise of God. There is no proof, no collateral, no guarantees, no protections. Only the word: For with God nothing will be impossible. And this word is enough.

There is something curious in the Greek language of the Magnificat. When Mary says, "My soul magnifies the Lord," she uses a present tense verb, whereas when she says "my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" the verb is in the aorist mood. Now, I know you are all fascinated with Greek grammar, but let me say simply that this unusual combination underscores the *ongoing nature of Mary's magnification*. She didn't mean, "My soul magnifies the Lord right this moment." Rather, she was testifying to the fact that her soul was magnifying God in a consistent, ongoing way. She magnifies God in her openness to God's will. She magnifies God through her perpetual trust. She magnifies God through the praise she shared with Elizabeth. And she will continue to magnify God *come what may*...

More importantly, Mary knows that her God is not only some personal private God who acts only in personal private ways. What God has done with Mary is coherent with what God has done at every decisive point in the life of the covenant people. God is mighty, holy and merciful, not only to one woman on whom God has looked with favor. God is mighty, holy, merciful to all who call upon and live according to God's promises.

Listen again to this litany of God's acts: *God has shown strength with God's arm; God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts; God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and the rich God has sent away empty; he has helped his people...*

It is at first glance a bit incongruous that these words of a mighty, powerful God, these words that ring like a battle cry, come from the mouth of a poor young unmarried woman who is happy because she is pregnant. But in that incongruity lies the key to who God is and how to sing this

song. Mary is not simply one young pregnant woman. Mary is the “First Disciple,” the first of generations who will say yes to God’s promises in Jesus.

In other words, this song is not just about Mary. It is ultimately about a God who makes us take notice of God’s promises, a God who will act and risk and be bold according to the divine promises made on behalf of all people like Mary.

Our world, as many of you know well, is full of crushing and numbing possibilities, from a new pandemic viral variant that looks as threatening as ever, to a cancer that will not stop, to an injury that will not heal, to a marriage which stumbles along, to wars that are just waiting to break forth with new carnage, and so on and so forth...

We shall not be prepared to face such a world if we try to move forward without hearing again the past word of the Lord. When all seems lost, we choose to remember who God is and what God has done, according to God’s word, and so can move forward confidently, “con-fide” with faith.

Remember God’s words of the past: “I will bless you and make you a blessing for all people”; “I will go with you”: “I know the plans I have for you...”; “Behold, I am doing a new thing...” “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age...” I cannot name all of the many complicated places in our lives for which we need to prepare to live according to the promises of God, but I know that in some odd way, we have what we really need when we look back and remember God’s promises...

Through his incarnation, not just as an infant, but as a man who lived and died and rose again, the living Christ offers himself as an alternative to religion reduced to slogan, morals, bumper sticker proverbs, thoughts for the day, religion relegated to the conventional, the boring rehash of the obvious and the already known. The Word of the Lord is a radical disruption to Sunday as adjustment to what is seen rather than, like the James Webb Telescope, probing for the unseen. The spirit of God magnifies us again by magnifying the hiddenness of what God is up to in our lives and world...

Just before the Christmas break of 1988 at Princeton Theological Seminary, a group of students and their families gathered for evening devotions in the Charlotte Newcombe Center on campus. The order of worship included carols, prayers, and scripture lessons. The high point of the service was to be the reading of the birth narrative from Luke.

Glenn Perica, a second-career seminarian and one of the chapel deacons, intoned the charmed and charming words which describe the decree from Caesar Augustus, the travels of the holy couple, the wonder of the shepherds, the song of angels.

As Glenn read aloud from the Bible, his son was sitting quietly at his feet. The boy was a study in single-minded concentration. As it happened, though, he was concentrating not on the text but on the task of firmly tying together his father’s shoelaces. Glenn happened to serve as the Associate Pastor at First Presbyterian Church where I was in Colorado, and I can tell you at

around 6'4" and 250 lbs, if he tripped over his shoelaces, that would be something you wouldn't forget in the middle of a worship service!

What seminary course has ever offered so realistic an introduction to the practice of Christian ministry? Unto us a child is born; unto us is given the gospel of salvation. Yet time and again, as we try to deliver this lavish gift to an impoverished world, we trip over our own feet.¹

On that night in December, those with both ears to hear and eyes to see learned something about the Incarnation. The miracle of Christmas is that the eternal Word did not grasp at equality with God, but, for our sake, joined with us in our stumbling estate. And God continues to magnify even us and extend God's redeeming love and grace through even us...

So in these final days of Advent waiting, we go forth as the church to magnify the Lord, not only in outer space, but in the everyday mundane activities of our lives here on earth. With Mary may we too with our thoughts, words, and actions declare, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ...for God has shown strength..., God has scattered the proud..., God has put down the mighty..., and exalted those of low degree; God has filled the hungry with good things..."

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.. and Magnifier. Amen.

¹ Excerpted from *Monday Morning*, 12/18/89