

CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE EYES OF MARY:

3. FAVORED

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Luke 1:46-55

Many of you will be familiar with the scripture reading for today by its informal title, the *Magnificat*. The title comes from the first word of the text when read in Latin from the Vulgate Bible. That first word is *Magnificat*-- *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*. My soul magnifies the Lord. *Magnificat* clearly means to magnify.

Now this text, this *Magnificat*, is most likely a hymn, one of the oldest hymns that we have in the New Testament. Some call it Mary's Psalm, and it is a hymn that Luke's congregation were likely familiar with. Luke is the writer of this Gospel. Maybe, they even sang it during worship services. And Luke, like any good writer, recognized when somebody else's words just said it better. I mean, it's no different than me citing "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing." Those aren't words I would ever say. Those aren't words I could even dream up. But they express that feeling of God's might so wonderfully as a hymn. I like to think of the *Magnificat* as a song of the people.

Does that mean that Mary didn't say these words? She certainly said something like this, and it beautifully captures her feeling for God and who she is.

The Gospel of Luke, as we've been reading these past couple of weeks, begins with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth—an older couple who were visited by an angel and informed that they will have a son. That son will become known to us as John the Baptist.

Six months after the angel's visit to Elizabeth and Zechariah he goes to Mary. *Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph. And the angel said greetings favored one. The Lord is with you.* And this young woman—Mary—is perplexed by these words. What does it mean that the Lord is with me? What does it mean that I am favored?

The angel continues, *Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive and bear a son. You will name him Jesus. He will be great. He will be called son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David. He will reign over the House of Jacob forever. And of his kingdom there will be no end.* And you can imagine that Mary was indeed perplexed by those words. For who would say that to a young girl who wasn't even married yet she's going to have this child that is going to have a kingdom? The angel then tells her about her cousin Elizabeth who is older and who has never had children. So, Mary responds with the

words that are the foundation of this series of sermons I've been preaching. She says, *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*"

This tells us everything about Mary. It tells us about her faith. And it tells us about her commitment to God. *Here am I, the servant of the Lord.*

Having said this, Mary travels to see Elizabeth, and when she comes to Elizabeth's home the child in Elizabeth's belly jumps and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. She is changed. And in turn, she calls Mary *blessed*. And Mary responds with this passage for today, the Magnificat.

Now if any of you have been part of the Catholic Church for any period of time, you are familiar with the Catholic view of Mary. They take a very high view of Mary. Mary is the mother of Christ, the wife of God. Mary is a saint. Mary is someone that we pray to. In fact, the Roman Catholics ascribed to a doctrine known as the Assumption of Mary which says that Mary didn't die, but at the end of her life she was carried body and soul, physically and spiritually, into heaven to live with her son forever.

During the Middle Ages, some in the church argued that Mary should be part of the Trinity to make it a four-person body with Father, Mother, Son, and Spirit. And there's a certain logic to that.

We as Protestants look at Mary in a different light. We take a lower view of her. But really, at best, we just tend to ignore her. We're not quite sure what to do with the figure of this young woman who gave birth to the Christ.

And it is probably a disservice to the person of Mary to do this. For she is indeed a crucial figure in the story of our faith. But it doesn't matter what Protestants believe. It doesn't matter what Catholics believe. What's important is what Luke believed. How did he view Mary? Luke portrays her as the idealized servant of God.

There is no one who is more giving than this young woman in all scripture. She is called by God through the archangel Gabriel. When given this incredible task of carrying the son of God, she responds immediately, saying, *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word*. She gives of herself wholly not quite sure what the future is going to bring her. I believe that everything that Mary says or does should be filtered through those words, *Here am I, the servant of the Lord*. She accepts God's call. She obeys God's will. And sadly, as a servant, she will suffer as well. She will witness her son's rejection and his execution. And this is something that no mother would ever want to experience.

Our reading for today begins with those words, *My soul magnifies the Lord*. And this commitment on Mary's part is a reminder that the ultimate task of a servant of God—of any servant of God—is to declare God's greatness to the world. Would that all of our souls magnified God's holy presence.

Mary then recounts how God found favor with her. Why does she feel favored? Because she's been given this task that is going to be so difficult and will take over her life. In fact, the life that she had planned—marrying Joseph and living in Nazareth—has been taken away. She's been given a new life, and yet she feels favored by this. She even talks about how God has looked with favor on her lowliness.

Lowliness. We talk about Mary as being this young, innocent, naive girl from a small village in Galilee, which is in a small country on the edge of the Roman Empire. We talk about how she is powerless.

But that is not what makes her lowly. No. Her lowliness stems from her humility. Because, when she looks at God—the God whom she calls the Mighty One—she is able to comprehend the great discrepancy between her and God. She recognizes that God is God and that she is but a person. Not all of us have that gift. Some have hearts that are so filled with pride that look at God and view themselves as equal hey God. Mary's humility is her strength and it sets her apart from most of the world.

The Magnificat really could have just ended right here. *Here I am a servant. I am lowly. I am humbled. God is great.* That would be enough. But it doesn't stop there. It keeps going, and now it becomes a song that is radical, that is revolutionary.

In fact, this passage is a part of Scripture that is cherished by the marginalized people of this world. In fact, it is banned in some countries with authoritarian leaders. In places where the poor are trampled, they read these words as God's promise of hope for it is nothing less than a declaration of justice. It proclaims how God is going to bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly. It proclaims how God will feed the hungry and also send the rich away empty. These are statements most of the world doesn't want to hear. And why is it that God does these things? God does these things because of the promise that God made with Abraham—that covenant to watch over us, to care for us, to love all, not just the wealthy and powerful, but the lowly, the despised, the hungry, the powerless. God loves all, and justice is evidence of God's love.

Today is the third Sunday of the season of Advent, and Advent is that time when we are reminded that we are to prepare ourselves for the coming of God's glorious Kingdom through the birth of Jesus Christ. And what better way to prepare for Advent than to magnify the work of God in this world.

Now preparing is not just words that we say. Preparing is serving. It is doing acts of compassion. It is sheltering the homeless and feeding the hungry and visiting the forgotten. It is doing all those things by which we might magnify God's love to this world. The star that shines over us at Christmas is a sign of God's love,

and through our acts we can make that light even brighter so that all may know the glory of the Lord.

As I've mentioned, the Magnificat is not some safe little statement of praise. It is subversive. It is radical. It is a protest. It is a dangerous message of hope to the downtrodden. It's a warning to the world that this coming birth will be a world transforming, universe shaking for the poor, for the oppressed, for those at the fringes. This is the good news that God cares about them. This Christ will challenge the structures of this world, structures that are built on sin and evil and death. Structures that are built on power and pride. And this Christ, who is to come, will lift up the fallen, pull down the haughty, bring justice to the oppressed.

It's a message that we find many times in Scripture, not just here. It's a message that we find in the songs that we sing on Sunday morning, including one by Edmund Sears—*It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*. Hear this verse.

*And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing;
O rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing.*

In this time of Advent, I urge you to listen for the words of those angels who call out to us to be humble and to magnify the light of the Lord.

Amen.