



Sunday, December 13, 2020

## Magnifying the Lord

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*Psalm 126; Luke 1:46b-55*

Mary sang: *"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."*

Mary — the girl from Nazareth. What do we know about Nazareth? It was a small town — not much more than a village, really. About 350 people, living in about thirty-five homes, spread over about six acres. It stood on its own small hill, 500 feet above the secluded valley; a little north of the great plain. The houses were actually cut into the cliffs. Modest houses, they stood upon the narrow knolls, and steep slopes. The limestone hillsides were like Swiss cheese; caves perforated them. Some of the houses were built over the caves, with the caves serving as the main dwelling, or as storage areas. Mary's parents' home was one of these. The town looked peaceful. But there were plenty of troubles. The name of their town suggested how troubled the times were. Nazareth. Some said it meant: "Send us a Helper!" Others said, "No, it means, 'Send us the Victorious One!' " But the older inhabitants took it to mean, "Be careful!" or "Keep a sharp lookout!"

Whether it was a cry for help, or a caution to be watchful, or both, the town was like the eye of a hurricane. A deceptive calm was there. A storm was brewing all around them. Nazareth was anything but tranquil, in those days. They lived in an occupied country, where it was hard to say what was worse: the soldiers who were billeted right there in the village; or the traitorous neighbors, who spied on everyone and made life miserable; or the members of the village council, who cared less for those in need than they did for maintaining the status quo.

In another age, would she have looked all around, wondering where the voice might have come from — trembling, when the Angel of the Lord appeared? If she had lived in a different age, would she have been so filled with grace? Would Mary have been ready — ready for the greatest gift of God, soon to be freely given to her? If she had lived in a different age, would she have heard the news that came to her? If she had lived in a more skeptical age, or a more enlightened age, or a more modern, or even post-modern, age, would she have listened to the words of her relative Elizabeth: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord"?

But Mary did not live in a different age. A young woman of her time, she responded out of the realities of her era. And she sang a song that magnified the Lord.

Professor Rolf Jacobson of Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota, says the Magnificat is "the kind of song that has been sung by countless people of faith through the ages in resistance, in defiance of empires, slavers, terrorists, invaders, and the like." Out of such things came a song of wonder and praise. Out of such things came news that stirred her to joy and hopefulness. For what the angel proclaimed stood in direct contrast to all that was cheap and tawdry, all that was cold and cruel, all that the people had suffered. Magnify the Lord with me — an invitation to us all to take a closer look, a very close look indeed, at who the Lord is and what the Lord is doing right now.

*"His mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation."*

Mary's song is a way to fend off what is bad, and focus on what is good — to reject the things that would limit life, and embrace what will make life whole.

Mary is looking to the joyous arrival of Jesus. And so are we. Mary is sure that, because of Jesus, the world is going to be made better. People who have been forgotten will find a place of honor and thanksgiving. Places that have moldered in decay will be restored. Purposes that have been abandoned, because they seemed too hard to accomplish, will come to fruition and be the source of blessing, because of Christ the Lord. Mary speaks as if it has happened already, even before the birth of the Child at Christmas. This is an expression of pure trust and deep faith that cannot be stopped. She knows He is coming. It is inevitable that He will. When He does, His mercy will

prevail. The proud and haughty will be cast down. The hungry will be filled with good things. And His people will live into His everlasting promise.

You have seen — and I have, as well — many statements and signs of late, saying how glad people will be to be done with 2020. There is a lot of truth in that. We are hoping that, as we move ahead in time, God our Savior will look with favor on all of His servants, and that blessings will abound. Can you permit yourself to look at this moment in your life the way Mary looked at hers? Can you look with a trust and assurance that is unshakable? Can you see that, because of Jesus, God is even now making things new and right?

We wish we had Mary's original tune as well as her words. Even though we do not, we are keenly aware that her song enlarges our understanding of God. The fact is the Magnificat boosts us out of discouragement. It enhances our appreciation of the Almighty. It maximizes our awareness of God's mighty deeds. Our commitment increases as we hear Mary's words. Our hope extends. Our vision expands. Our love is amplified. Our thankfulness is intensified. Our senses are heightened. Our devotion is deepened. Our belief is broadened. Our wonder is widened. Mary's song moves from being a solo to being an anthem, sung by Christians in every time and place. We take up Mary's song and sing along, in praise and blessing, in worship and adoration. With Mary, we magnify and extol the Lord.

Why is it that you can still sing something you sang as a child, that you have not sung since? But, given a chance, you know all the words by heart. Songs are powerful. Songs find a way into hearts that are otherwise closed. Songs lodge in the mind like a welcome guest. Songs become the theme of our day or our life.

Songs persist in our memory. Even the most prosaic of songs do this. And Mary's song is among the most profound. Mary's song is about a future vision of the restoration of all humanity; a song about the fulfillment of God's intentions; a song about the advent of wholeness which God has promised to the whole human family.

According to the Church calendar, the third Sunday of Advent is Joy Sunday, from the Latin word *Gaudete* ("Rejoice"). This is a day for us to stop and recognize the joy God brings into our lives by the arrival of the King of heaven and earth. It is as John Wesley has said:

*"And she rejoiced in hope of salvation through faith in Him, which is a blessing common to all true believers ... ."*

Magnify the Lord. Whatever your darkness, whatever your despair, let Mary's song provide light and hope for you in the midst of your life this season. Amen.