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## **My Soul is Magnified** – Luke 1:39-56

Our series is on the journey of Advent. Last week, we joined Joseph in an epic journey of faith, as he transformed from a typical devout Jewish man of his time, sure how God works, to a man open to a whole different reality, unafraid and ready to be Mary's husband, whatever that might mean, ready to name her child Jesus (the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means, "God will save") because, as an angel told him in a dream, "He [Jesus] will save his people from their sins." We have a similar journey to make ourselves, learning to be open to God's working in and among us today.

Today is a part of Mary's story, and covers more than one journey. She makes a physical trip to see her cousin Elizabeth; but Mary also makes a spiritual trek as she learns more about her part in God's story. She becomes one of the great poets of Scripture. Her poem is part of our reading this morning, sometimes called Mary's Song, but known to many as the *Magnificat*, from the poem's first word in Latin:

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Let's consider what it must have been like to be Mary. First, you're a teenage peasant girl, soon to be married. Simple enough.

However, you've also been visited – in person – by the angel Gabriel, who has told you a lot way beyond your understanding (what could it possibly mean that “you have found favor with God,” let alone “you will conceive...and bear a son” or “the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you”?). You know you are pregnant, and certainly have a whole lot of unanswered questions about how all this is going to work out. Women are property, have no legal or religious standing; how can you explain any of this to anyone? Who would or could believe you?

So you runs off to consult with your cousin, also miraculously pregnant, as Gabriel said. What was Mary thinking? Perhaps Elizabeth has some useful advice on how to explain all this to the family and Joseph, since Elizabeth is in on whatever God is up to. At least it will get you away from prying eyes and awkward questions for a while...

Elizabeth doesn't even have time to say hello: her unborn son, who will be John the Baptist, gives her a good kick as soon as he hears Mary's voice. *He* already knows who Mary is and who Mary's unborn child is to be, and Elizabeth is inspired to say words that are still part of the Roman Catholic prayer tradition: words, which along with some of Gabriel's, make up the Ave Maria – the original Hail Mary.

Right here is where Mary's physical trip becomes a journey of discovery. How does Elizabeth know all this? What seems at first to be

a private matter suddenly opens out to encompass the entire world. Mary, too, is filled with the Holy Spirit, and spontaneously composes this amazing poem about God and God's purposes.

But read it closely. This is not a poem about how beautiful things are, but how God is in the process of changing everything, turning the world upside down. They are fitting words for someone living under the hand of the Romans, but what discovery can they lead *us* to today?

First, God is faithful. The ancient promises of God's coming Kingdom, often repeated until they were just words, spill out again...reminding us that God's purposes are often acted out over centuries.

Second, God does not respect human rank or power or success or gender. God know how socially insignificant a woman – girl – like Mary is, but has chosen her to be a crucial part of his plan of salvation for everyone, the rich and poor, the unknown and famous, the powerful and the powerless.

Third, God lifts up the humble, and cuts down the proud. In fact, this inspired poem reminds us of the prophecies that come before, the lowly and humble are fed and cared for; the rich and comfortable sent away empty-handed. Hard things for us to hear in our relative comfort and security – making us ask, can or should anyone be comfortable in this world?

But what's really remarkable is the very beginning: her first words, "My soul *glorifies* the Lord!" is, in the Greek and Latin, "my soul *magnifies* the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior" – or, perhaps closer to our contemporary understanding of the words, as another translation puts it, "God, my Liberator!" God, our Liberator – liberating us from the oppression of sin.

But back to "magnify:" how does the soul of an ordinary, teenage girl *magnify* the greatness of God? Translators generally try to use secondary meanings of this word, like "lift up," "exalt," or "glorify." But perhaps Mary, under the influence of the Spirit, is being very precise: perhaps her soul does magnify God.

That's *her* discovery that *we* need today; the realization that human beings can take little bits of God's grace and magnify them, make them clearer. And when that happens, God magnifies people's souls, our souls, as well.

One of you sent me a cartoon last week, drawn by political cartoonist Tom Toles. Now, we don't often talk about the bishop of Rome, the Roman Catholic Pope; but Francis is different, as you may already have heard. Francis is truly amazing. Wading into crowds, losing his security detail; living in simple rooms rather than the Papal Apartments; speaking his heart and mind in ways no recent pope has ever done publicly.

This cartoon shows Francis holding a piece of paper, on which are written the words: “Love. Caring. Justice.” And a man is saying to Francis, “You’re making exactly the same crazy impractical mistakes as Jesus. How do you expect to run a religion like that?”

Francis’ passion for Jesus Christ, while we may disagree deeply about the details, magnifies God: makes God’s subtle Kingdom work around the edges, which can be easy to ignore, clear and easy to see. God has magnified his soul, too: given him the gift to see and speak of and do those tiny but powerful things.

Another example: ninety-nine years ago this month, World War I was raging across Europe. Incredibly stupid things were happening; unthinkable slaughter, violence, and aggression had already turned into the meat-grinder of trench warfare. Millions of British and French troops were in muddy, stinking, cold trenches facing German and Austrian soldiers in similar trenches. Since the war was only supposed to last only days or weeks, few had appropriate clothing to stay warm; many were hungry; all were trying to kill the strangers on the other side; both sides believed that God approved of their righteous cause.

But the calendar did not notice, and kept on marking the days, until Christmas Eve arrived. In the darkness, where only hours before “kill or be killed” had ruled, someone started singing a Christmas carol, and someone else started doing the same thing from the other side. Soon, the

first cautious head peeked over the parapet, and didn't get shot; eventually, the trenches emptied, fires lit, trees found, candles appeared, and food, blankets... Despite the horror all around, enough Christianity remained, glimmering up from the mud, stench, and death, to transform the battlefield into a place of grace.

Those soldiers magnified the Lord. In the midst of one of the most brutal examples of a brutal thing, the instinct of the combatants was to show and share the spirit of Christmas, the Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of the Prince of Peace. Their souls magnified the hard-to-see pieces of the Gospel, God's acts here among us in the middle of all the horror, so that now we can pick them out, see them for ourselves, imitate the glory of God ourselves.

Like Mary, like Francis, their souls made the Gospel visible. "Something profound takes place in the soul of a person when they know they matter;"\* as the carol says, "the soul [feels] its worth." God magnified *their* souls, so that they could magnify, could glorify God in the unlikeliest of circumstances. Paul says to the suffering church in Thessalonica, "...the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified through your lives, and you will be glorified in Him according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus, the Anointed One, our Liberating King. (1:12)

There are three journeys today. Mary's trip to see her cousin; Mary's inspired insight into God's coming Kingdom; and ours, to meet

Mary and her message. May our souls magnify the Lord Jesus Christ, her child, God's son; and, just as God has magnified, lifted up, inspired so many, may your soul magnify and be magnified by God, our Savior, our Liberator, so that we can show the beauty of God's birth in Jesus.

\*By way of Diane Christopher