

The Magnificat: Luke 1:46-56, 12/13/09

Our text this morning is from the Gospel of Luke. It's printed in your bulletin. If you were raised Catholic, this is one of the four songs you needed to know. You needed to know the *Benedictus* (Zechariah's song – Zechariah is the father of John the Baptist), the *Gloria*, (the song of the angels), the *Nunc dimittis* (Simeon's song), and this one, the *Magnificat* (Mary's Song). They all come from Luke's Gospel, and collectively have become known as "the canticles." The Biblical songs. This one, since it comes first, is sometimes considered the 1st Christmas Carol. It's called the *Magnificat*, because it is the Latin for the very first word *in* the song as it's written in Latin, "Magnify." Let's look at it together:

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home. (ESV)

When my kids were 5 or so, I remember sitting down to watch *The Sound of Music* with them. And it really took them by surprise when, after some dramatic exposition, the nuns started to sing, "How Do You Solve A Problem Like Maria?" Somehow, it seemed okay and normal for computer generated vegetables to break out into a tune, but these were *real* people, "big people!" "Daddy, why are they singing?" They had a sense that the drama had stopped for some reason, something important.

Mary's song is like that. It's like an aria in an opera. The action almost stops so that the situation – the events that have just happened – can be savored more deeply. Except that in an opera, you have to suspend disbelief to appreciate that this largish soprano would break into song after finding out that she is dying of consumption.¹

With Mary's song, there is no suspension of disbelief necessary – it's *obvious* why she would break into song. Something has happened! Something not performed by computer generated manipulation, or emotionally manipulative drama – but something by God, that has caused this breaking into song.

If the event is both real and divinely instituted, and the emotions are real and inspired, well then we want to look at this song, and see if it's ours, too. Because this IS the first Christmas carol.

¹ *La Boheme*, by Puccini

Shouldn't we be singing it too? *This is the first song that sings of God's only child becoming humanity, so that humanity can sing of being God's children.*

If you can sing this song, then you know you are a Christian. And if you profess faith, but this song just doesn't sound right with your voice and heart, then we really must stop the action. Some of us – we really need to do what Mary is doing right here: God IS doing amazing things. Extraordinary things. But we don't stop. We don't stop to sing. And something is lost. So this morning we want to look at

- Why Mary sings at Christmas
- Why we don't sing at Christmas
- How we *can* sing at Christmas

So first, why Mary sings at Christmas.

Let me ask you this: what would make you sing, wildly, emotionally, and without inhibition? Maybe someone you know has been in the hospital and near death... but suddenly they get better, and they are about to come home. Maybe you've been watching the flood waters or fires coming near your home... but then they recede, or the wind changes. Maybe it's the news that your financial worries have finally been sorted out, and you see some hope. Maybe the call comes that says that the job you have long wanted is now yours – any of those things could make someone put their favorite music on and do the dance of joy.

All of those situations – all of those reasons – are good reasons. They're all based on receiving, like Mary, good news. But something is deeper and greater here. Waters come back. Financial woes can hit again. New jobs are sometimes the first to be cut back. But Mary is changed *forever*. "*From now on,*" she says in v. 48, "*all generations will call me blessed.*" Mary doesn't just receive good news "from the outside," but this news goes down to the inner chambers of her heart. Down into the depths of her soul: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God." It's an intentional couplet – she is piling on the nouns to describe not two separate places, but that one, single, and deepest inner place: "My soul, my spirit, rejoices and magnifies."

You see, she isn't saying, "I've made some changes in my life!" She doesn't sing out "I've finally dropped all my negative feelings, and through therapy, I've become more positive in my outlook." She doesn't sing, "I can finally fit into those old jeans." There's nothing wrong with that – it's just that this *isn't* that. No, she's saying I have been changed radically from the inside out, and my heart is aflame with this change. It's a flame, it's a change, that burns away the past and changes *everything*. She has been emptied out, and filled back up with something greater.

Now, every Christian should connect with this. Everyone who claims the name of Jesus. Because it is a change you cannot imagine on your own.

Have you ever tried some sort of self-help approach, or some new diet or exercise program, or a new way to stay organized, and from the very beginning, there is this gnawing fear... "what if this doesn't work? What if I can't keep it up, and I fall back into the same old thing." Again, this is *not that*. This is a change that says, "there is *no* going back, because there is no 'back' to go back to!"

This is a change that overtakes you – where the moment you consider and receive it – it decides upon you. It's a power that transforms your very being. It is change that is supernatural. Every Christian knows this. Every Christian here. But some of us are not singing. Right? Some of us have not sung in a long time.

Why? Because certain truths about God – these truths that Mary sings, have not found a home in your heart. They haven't taken up residence in your heart.

Look, in a sense, the things Mary sings are the things we have sung this morning: "Glories stream from heaven afar, Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia! Christ the Savior is born!" But when does it become more than a carol, and become *your personal hymn of praise*?

See, the cultural understanding of Christmas is, "can't we all just get along." Today, Christmas is the sweet and humanistic idea that for a season, through gift-giving and general "good cheer," usually abetted by sweetened alcohol, we can summon up good thoughts for each other. We give to the poor, the races come together, and as the bumper sticker says, we can joyfully "coexist."

You know how long that lasts, right? It lasts until black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, when you're fighting the crowds during the sales at the start of the season. In other words, it's over before it begins!

So how does Mary have and know this wonderful experience of God's deep and abiding love? Over in chapter 2, the power of this same message is again brought by the angel to the Shepherds. "Silent night, holy night, Shepherds quake at the sight." The shepherds, you'll remember, are stopped in their tracks and overwhelmed by the unveiled, transcendent glory of God exploding on this plain outside of Bethlehem. You have these peasants given this amazing honor of seeing the unhindered radiance of divine glory. And the angel gives them instructions on how they can find Messiah, the Christ child, and gives the announcement that the Prince of Peace had arrived. Then we read in Chapter 2, verse 15:

"When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.' And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ***But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart***".

Now friends, here is how a carol of warm, syrupy sugar-plums and sticky, soft chestnuts becomes a white hot personal hymn that explodes in the inner chamber of the soul and giving you not "warmth" but divine power. The message Mary treasures is not man-centered, but God centered. Mary's theology is Christ-centered. She sings of MY savior. "*He who is mighty* has done great things for me, and *holy is his name*. *His* mercy is for those who fear him... *He* has shown strength with his arm; *he* has scattered the proud ..." You see, *this* Christmas – the Christmas that Mary is having – shows her not who she is, but who he is. In other words, the Christmas she knows is not where human beings just all try to get along, but is about the announcement of a God who has come down to a people that have historically *never* gotten along. She treasures up and

ponders the fact that this is a God who came to take residence in her womb – the presence of God moves out of heaven or a temple, and into a person! – the fact that he should do such a thing for us tells us everything about him and it moves deep into her soul, and it emits an eternal fire.

Friends we don't sing this because we don't *treasure* it. We don't sing this, because we're too busy to *ponder* it. And we don't sing because we think Christmas is about us, instead of *him*.

It's not enough to be exposed to the glory of God. It's not enough to hear the Christmas story and the word of God. Or even to periodically attend the worship of God in his church. You have to have God – his Spirit – take residence and abide in your heart such that everything in your life and world is understood *through him*. See the Christian message is that Christ has come, and his Spirit is not leaving! Do you know what this means? Permanent and radical change. Nothing can be the same after that. It's not just men and women getting along in *spite* of their sin. It means that you are emptied *of* your sin – you are emptied of a heart that repeatedly and relentlessly thinks only about itself – and you are filled with his Spirit so that you are now able to think about others. Mankind can be at peace because we are at peace with God. *That* is what makes Christmas *Christmas*. How? Jesus empties himself of his righteousness and glory, and takes up residence in your sinful heart, putting to death your sin to raise you to newness of life. **THAT** is Mary's song. And that's our first point: Mary's song changes her life because it is focused on God and what he has done, and not herself. And Mary has stored this truth up in her heart – she treasures it, so that it will see her through it all. Remember – Mary's life is hard – every bit as difficult as yours. She will lose Jesus for three days when he is twelve. She will think he's gone mad when he's thirty. She will despair completely for a further three days in Jerusalem, as the God she now wildly celebrates seems to have deceived her – though he's actually saving her at that moment! We need a song like this to push the truth of God's love down deep in the storehouse of our heart for just such moments.

And so secondly, what about you? Is this your song? What if you don't feel your heart singing like Mary's?

You know, one of the reasons that Christians and unbelievers alike don't sing this song, is these verses 49-51. It is this word, "mighty."

The problem begins in V. 49 which starts with this word "for." A little word that means "because." Mary's soul magnifies the Lord "for" – "because" – "he who is *mighty* has done great things... He has shown strength with his arm."

Now I hope you hear the irony in this. I don't know a person in this room that doesn't want what Mary wants! We want music. We want to sing. We want overwhelming joy. We want transformed lives. We want it by not being ourselves, but by being what we think of as our *better* selves. But we don't want the power in our lives to have what Mary has, because it means we give up *our* power.

Look, if there is a God, does it not seem logical that God would be mightier than you are? If there is a God, would not the true God *be* "God Almighty?" If God is the creator of all things, doesn't it logically follow that he's greater than all things... including you and me?

You see, that is a simple truth that not many of us have wanted to "treasure." Rather than our souls feeling magnified by that truth, we would feel diminished if we pondered that for too long. Because we feel like we would lose ourselves.

It works like this. You're on the job this week, and your boss sends you an email asking you if you completed the assignment he or she asked for last week. And you write back, "Yes," but the truth is you haven't, and you go off scurrying to bang it out to cover your tracks... what's going on there?

You don't believe God is mighty! You might even sweat bullets and pray *to* God that your boss never realize that you lied... but you still don't believe God is mighty, or you wouldn't have lied in the first place!

You see, you want *your* glory, *your* power, *your* professional glory and might, more than you want God's power and might... That's why v. 50 says, "His mercy is for those who fear him." Mary is singing so gloriously because she knows she is a sinner in need of saving – and she fears that this sin under the judgment of God will keep her from a life *with* her God. But it is this very God who became so small he fits in her womb... to save her! His mercy is for those who know that he is the only one *worth* fearing... and he loves to save! But if you fear your boss more than God, mercy *never* breaks in.

As Tim Keller would put it, "you intellectually believe that he's mighty, but you don't *really* believe that he's mighty."

You see, there are people who look at Christmas and this idea of a baby in a manger, and they see that as a silly story about silly idea of God that is believed in by silly and weak people. There is no power there – there is no might there. But if you look at that same baby in a manger and you see that for what it **REALLY** is – **evidence** of God's power – then streams of mercy pour in. It allows you to be free – free enough to tell the truth in the short term, because in the long run you know that the mighty one is always on your side. "If God is for me, who can be against me?" If you don't see his power and might, no wonder you're not singing!

Before we move on, Mary is going to sing about something in the latter part of her song (vv. 51-53) that is a theme throughout the scriptures. In fact you see it later in the Gospel of Luke – that the rich and the mighty... they have a hard time accepting the gospel. And the reason is they like their own power and wealth. Remember the Rich Young Ruler who approaches Jesus and asks him what he must do to have eternal life? And Jesus says, "Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." The rich young man walks away looking sad because indeed he was mighty because of his wealth and possessions.

You see, he trusted in those possessions for safety, security, identity, comfort. Those things made him culturally attractive and popular.

The disciples heard this response and were confused. Why? Because everybody thinks personal wealth, power and might = blessings. Don't we still?

You know, you may want to ask me to repent later, but I did see a few of those Tiger Woods text messages this week. And one of them caught my eye. Here was the richest athlete in the world – estimates say he is a billionaire – with a lovely wife and kids as far as I can tell, and in one of his text messages, he is worried that one of these girlfriends who he claims is THE ONE he really wants to be with, they click so well, might only like him because he's famous.

Think about that. As much personal power as you can have...you would think people with all of that personal power and wealth wake up singing like Mary, just breaking into song. The rich and mighty can take or buy anything they want. But as Jesus says, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

You may not be a billionaire, but chances are you have looked to something as your personal power-source. In this country, we're all rich, relatively speaking. *Something* makes you strong and self-possessed and in need of no one else. But chances are that same thing has betrayed you because it CAN'T give you that power. To receive true, lasting, life-giving power, you have to lay those other sources of power down. It looks mean and judgmental in Mary's song, but she intends it to sound gracious when she sings that God scatters "the proud in the thoughts of their hearts." She means it to sound merciful when she sings that God "has brought down the mighty from their thrones," and "the rich he has sent away empty." Because if God lets them trust in those things, they will end up as sad as the Rich Young Ruler or a famous golf professional.

Finally, let's look at what has to happen for this song to really be ours. What must happen for us to sing like Mary?

And here it is. You have to believe that a moment of crisis is actually a moment of grace.

Mary sings, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Now that is hard to put together, isn't it? Because the only people who need a savior are the people that are in deep trouble. People in a crisis. But here, Mary is singing for *joy* about needing a savior! Mary knows that a moment of crisis is a moment of God's grace.

Thomas Aquinas, the great theologian of the church in the 13th century, took a long look at these verses. Thomas poured over this song and saw in these words of Mary an acknowledgement of Mary's personal need for a savior.

Now you have to remember – this is before the church – the Catholic church – defined the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary or the sinlessness of Mary. Thomas believed that Mary, like any other woman in the world, was a sinner. And he drew this inference from these very verses – "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

Now that word, *soter*, meaning "salvation," could certainly mean that Mary means to say that this salvation or rescue is from a financial or natural disaster. Or being saved from oppression or a life threatening illness. It just could be that when Mary sings, "my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," all she means is that God has saved me from my humble estate, and now he has exalted me to this high estate by blessing me to bear this particular child.

But look. Is that what the Gospel of Luke is really about? Saving people from a low state in the culture? His mission is not simply to save us from financial calamities or military disasters, but to save us from the ultimate calamity – namely the judgment of God upon our sin.

When you realize that in this story that Luke tells, he records that this child will specifically be called "Jesus" because he will save his people from their sins," you know *exactly* what has Mary's soul on fire for God. Thomas Aquinas was right! When Mary says "my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," she is acknowledging that she is in need of a savior from her sin, which would only be true if she *was* a sinner! And this isn't some kind of humble, self-deprecating, self-designation, but rather this self-understanding is *also* inspired. If Mary, under the power of the Holy Spirit, declares herself to be a sinner in need of saving, then she is, and that makes it all the more understandable that she would be passionately praising about this, because she bears within her own body the one that would save her from these sins. If Mary didn't need to be saved from a problem at the deepest level of her soul – whether she is right with the God of the universe – she would not be bursting into song. No she would be in fear. And she is! But Mary knows that this moment of crisis is actually a moment of grace.

We just said it. Mary means it to sound gracious when she sings that God scatters "the proud in the thoughts of their hearts." Why? Because she knows that the proud and the mighty – and we're all proud, Mary, too, right? – need to be confronted. Why? Because God can't work with the proud.

Here's what I mean. A friend of mine from college is a motivational speaker. What's the message? Here is what his promotional material says about his seminars: "Learn the secrets to satisfaction in life and be fulfilled even in situations that challenge you. Unlock the unconscious mechanisms that keep you from pursuing your desires or dreams. Step out of your ruts and routines and into a much more adventurous and fulfilling experience of life. Discover the satisfaction of living genuinely for more intimacy and satisfaction in all of your relationships. Uncover your deeper desires and create a vision for a life that is bigger than you imagined." In other words, your problem is that you don't believe in yourself. You don't have what it takes to be successful because you don't see that you have the power within you. Mary – yes this one woman of low estate – says, "If you believe that sort of thing – that blessedness comes from loving and believing in yourself – then God cannot work with you. Because you don't think you need any saving. The more sure you become that you have what it takes, the more certain you are of yourself, the more certain you are of your own capabilities, the less likely you are to receive from God the very transcendence, hope and power you want. Because you don't see the crisis.

What is the crisis? Friends, there is only one throne. There is only one king. One mighty one. Why is it that the gospel is spreading like a flood in China and South America, but is on the wane in America and Europe? Because we see ourselves as above that message. *We* sit on the throne.

Can you admit, like Mary that you are an inadequate leader of your own life? Can you admit that you are unworthy to sit on the throne of your own existence? That's why the Mary's, the poor, the insignificant, the lowly, are the ones who will be singing. They admit they have a problem. They say, "I need a savior."

This room is filled with successful, educated, competent people. You're a tough crowd for the gospel. But you have to become poor and hungry, Mary says, to sing like her.

The Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard once said that the world in which we live is like a store where all the price tags have been switched and become confused. It's when the Spirit moves in Mary's heart that she sees the real value of things – she sees things like God does, and that makes her sing. The priceless has become a single cell – for her!

Look, I don't mean "go out and sell everything to follow Jesus."

Unless it IS possessions that has you wanting to stay on your throne! Because it is the poor that are not afraid to say, "I need. I can't do this by myself. I feel unacceptable."

The poor are not too proud to believe in the supernatural. You have to be willing to be last to know what it's really like to be God's first thought. You have to be willing to call upon a crucified, bloody and dying Lord to know what it is to have God magnify your soul.

Let's Pray.