

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“My Soul Magnifies the Lord, and My Spirit Rejoices in God, My Savior”

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Luke 1:46-55

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Mary's Magnificat . . . Mary's song that pours from her when she is greeted by her cousin Elizabeth. Both women with child. Both miracles. Mary's song is poetry, prophecy, and prayer. Mary's song invites those who hear it to a Christian experience and intimacy with God beyond what we might have thought possible because Mary's song does not ask us merely to hear it, but also to join her and pray it.

Mary had seen and heard an angel, which was not an everyday kind of experience. That angel's message was somewhat, shall we say, challenging: “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus.” And it had come to pass. Mary was with child. Life was within her. Unmarried, a teenager, Mary had a lot to think about. But her thoughts weren't just on herself. She perceived that what was happening to her . . . and in her . . . wasn't just about her, but was God's redemption for all of humanity. Reclaiming God's work all the way back to Abraham, she recalled the promises of God to redeem His people.

She had a lot more on her mind than just herself, though she herself, fully represented all the others she thought about. So she sang about people who are down and out, low and slow, raised up. And those who are rich and haughty, powerful and mighty, brought down. God's great reversal was on her mind. So was going to see her cousin Elizabeth, and probably how Joseph was doing, and what people were going to say about her.

There may be a lot on your mind this morning. It could be that for some of you, that big present under the tree that has your name on the tag is on your mind. What could it be? Maybe you are thinking about the ingredients you still need for the big meal, or the decorations left to hang, or maybe who won't be home for Christmas this year. Some of you have travel plans on your mind . . . getting the car packed, all that kind of stuff. Some of you have other things on your mind that have nothing to do with the holidays. In fact, if you are honest about it, Christmas is sort of in the way of everything else. Work is slow, but bills keep coming. There's a lot on our minds.

Even when we get focused enough to study scripture, a lot can be on our minds. How did Mary know all of this stuff? How did Luke know to write it down? What is the first-century context here? Virgin Birth? And so on and so on. There's a lot we could be thinking about, and Mary's prayer-song certainly invites a lot of thinking, which we should do. As it turns out we are pretty good at thinking. We can think and reflect on and on. We can even think and reflect and come to different conclusions, and so we can

debate about them. And that's all well and good. But it is not the most important thing to happen here.

Mary's not primarily 'thinking' or 'reasoning.' She's praying, praising, rejoicing, responding, reflecting, projecting. This isn't head-work. It's soul-work. It's deeper and quieter. It's more personal and more universal. It's the difference between, "Aw, I've heard that story a hundred times" and "I've never heard it that way before." It's the difference between hearing and listening, thinking and pondering, analyzing and responding, "Let it be to me according to your word."

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior."

Her rejoicing in her savior is peculiar to her gift of being His mother, but in another sense is no different from our rejoicing. She had the same reason to rejoice that we have: God regarded the low estate of His handmaid; in like manner He has regarded our low estate. And came and saved her and us when we were reduced to the lowest point of sin and misery.

This rejoicing is shared by everyone who grasps the significance of the coming of Christ. Our Savior has come.

So I was wondering what would happen if we just focused on that one line. The rest of what she says IS vital to understanding what God is doing in the world, how to understand the coming of Jesus, and to catch a glimpse of God's upside-down kingdom, but what if we held all of that in trust one morning and just focused on the one line, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior."

This focusing on one line is what we do when we practice *lectio divina*. Sacred reading of scripture slows down and meditates on a word or a phrase that is pregnant with the presence of the divine and potentially a word directly to us. We read it and read it and read it again until we aren't just reading it as the words of someone else, but they become our words, our song, our prayer. The words are not just the opening words to the Magnificat written by Luke on the lips of Mary in the first century on the occasion of an unlikely encounter by two pregnant cousins somewhere in Judah. They are our words, our prayer, our heartbeat.

If we focus on this, we might pray it like the Jesus prayer or breath prayer. Some of you have been practicing the Jesus prayer, also called the breath prayer in which you pray over and over again in concert with your inhaling and exhaling, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." We can take the same discipline and inhale and exhale this prayer, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior." Imagine lying down to bed Christmas Eve night with this prayer on your heart. As we pray this, our soul begins to awaken to magnify the Lord and our spirits rejoice in our Savior. The prayer of our mouths becomes the meditation of our hearts. It's a prayer that opens us up spiritually to experience Christmas as not just a recapitulation of ancient events, but as the occasion for God's continued coming into our world and our lives—that in the humbleness of Mary's response, we, too, are open to God being born in us.

While we meditate on the verse, we begin to ponder on the beauty and power of the words in our prayer. My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior.

‘Soul’ and ‘spirit’ here aren’t technical terms as if young Mary has a theory on the metaphysical distinction between soul and spirit. We don’t take this text and then pound out theories of why a soul would magnify the Lord and a spirit would rejoice. This is poetry. This is music. But with that said, these are different words. The word for soul is *su-He*, from which we get our word psyche as in psychological. Soul. Soul is who you are in the depths of your being. It’s who you most truly are—including your personality, but not just your personality. Most people probably don’t really even fully know themselves well enough to know their own soul completely. That’s a life journey and discovery. Our soul is what lives when we most fully live. Some say the soul is the part of us that continues on when our bodies die.

And Spirit, the word is *pneuma*. It also means breath or wind. We get our words pneumatic, pneumonia. Our spirit, then, is that which animates us. Our spirit gives and sustains our life. Those moments when you feel most alive, like you are swept up in something so good that it carries you up higher and higher. Maybe that’s spirit within you.

Taken together then, the song is: That that which is most fully me, in the depths of my being, my true-self, the fullest me in all that I am and all that I live, magnifies/glorifies the Lord and rejoices.

One of us at lectionary breakfast remarked, “We could focus on just this one line for the whole of Advent.” How true. Even though much of Advent is preparation and waiting with Zechariah, and taking hard account of our lives with John the Baptist, Advent invites us, calls us to rejoicing. So, yes, we could spend all of Advent on this one verse.

This is a season for rejoicing. With all the hunger and war and pain in the world, something in us might object to such rejoicing. How can we dare rejoice when the world is groaning? We might seem callous or selfish, or just cheerfully bubble-brained, simple-minded escapists. I suppose the only way to dare to rejoice is to hear the groans of the earth as groans of childbirth like we hear them described in Romans. For a world in need of relief, there is no worthier cause to rejoice than “Your God is coming.” For people in all walks of life, we could focus on this one line for all of Advent.

We could also take it a step farther. What if all of life was about this one verse?

Abraham Heschel once wrote, “To pray is to know how to stand still and to dwell upon a word.” Which word? If all of the words in the world were reduced to the scripture, and all of scripture reduced to the gospels. And all the gospels to Luke. And all of Luke to Mary’s prayer. And all of Mary’s prayer to the opening line, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior” . . . then which word? Soul? Spirit? Rejoice? God? Savior?

Perhaps different people will find a different word today. What they need the most. As for me, I can't help but take them all together. It is enough of a discipline to just stay focused on one line, much less one word.

And what a line. It's a confession of deepest joy and highest praise. It's "Pray at all times without ceasing" plus "Let all that is within me praise the Lord" plus "Whatever is good and true and noble, think on these things" plus "Restore unto me the joy of my salvation and renew a right spirit within me" plus "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty who was and is and is to come" plus "Let it be to me according to your word." It's a prayer of submission to God, and hope in God.

Meditating on this prayer, and letting it become an act of prayer causes us to ask, "Is this my prayer? Does my soul magnify the Lord? Does my spirit rejoice in God my savior?" My own answer, honestly . . . sometimes. Not often enough.

The times of not, as I've reflected, are times when I've taken my eyes off of my Lord, and not considered God my savior. It's when I've kind of forgotten this gift that God has freely given to all of us, kind of, you know, taken it for granted. Isn't that terrible? To take for granted God's greatest gift. To forget what it means that God is our savior. It's just really easy to get distracted even by good things—to think about the way we do church and what it means to be on mission, and what community means and how we can do spiritual formation, and what responsibilities are coming up, and how to practice hospitality, and how to articulate as best as possible each Sunday what all of this might mean for me, for you, and for us together. And, you have your list of distractions. And it's easy, too easy, too often to forget where it all starts. Right here, on our knees before a baby in a manger, my soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God, my savior.

To remember it, to have it on your mind, in your heart, enlivening your soul is to offer your whole being to God. This is Christian prayer: To be wholly God's because He is wholly ours.

About 1000 years ago a monk named Symeon (the New Theologian) penned poems called *Hymns of Divine Love*. This one seems particularly poignant this morning as we join our hearts to the prayer of Mary, with child:

What is this awesome mystery that is taking place within me? I can find no words to express it; my poor hand is unable to capture it in describing the praise and glory that belong to the One who is above all praise, and who transcends every word. . . . My intellect sees what has happened, but it cannot explain it. It can see, and wishes to explain, but can find no word that will suffice; for what it sees is invisible and entirely formless, simple, completely uncompounded, unbounded in its awesome greatness. What I have seen is the totality recapitulated as one. Just as if you lit a flame from a flame, it is the whole flame you receive.