

Magnificat: The Song of Mary

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Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning.

I'm Tonya, and I'm part of the Oikos in the Oaks small group and women reading women book club. Today's scripture reading is from the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verses 39 to 55, as printed in the liturgy, a reading from the Gospel according to Luke.

At that time, Mary got ready and hurried to a hill in the country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

In a loud voice, she exclaimed, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear. But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

[1 : 12] As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her.

And Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on, all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me.

Holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.

This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. All right. Good morning. Am I on? Can you hear me?

[2 : 22] Okay, great. We are in this sermon series that we began last week called The Songs of Christmas. And Luke was a doctor.

He was a historian. And he wrote one of the four gospels in the New Testament. And he opens this biography of Jesus with songs and with singing.

And last week we heard the angel Gabriel's word in Luke chapter 1 to Mary. He says, hail Mary, you who are highly favored of the Lord.

The Lord is with you. And that has been turned, of course, into a song that in Latin is called the Ave Maria. My favorite version of that is by Franz Beebel and the group Chanticleer.

You can go home and listen to that hopefully later today. This morning we're going to be talking about the song of Mary. And then next week the song of Zechariah. And then the song of Simeon.

[3 : 19] And then on Christmas Eve we'll be talking about the song of the angels. And these really are the first and original Christmas carols. You probably won't hear them on the radio.

You're not going to hear them in the store. But Luke puts them here at the beginning of his gospel because he wants us to know them. Because they inform our minds and they enliven our hearts about the true meaning of Christmas.

There's a lot of meanings of Christmas floating around. What's the true meaning of Christmas? And Mary's song, which is called the Magnificat in Latin, it's a very special song.

Because here is this young woman from a small village in rural Galilee. She has no wealth, no position, no power. And yet she gives us one of the most famous songs in Christianity. It's a song that's been set to music in hundreds of languages. It's a song that over the past two millennia has been whispered in monasteries and chanted in cathedrals and recited in small remote churches.

[4 : 28] And has resounded with trumpets and kettle drums from Johann Sebastian Bach. And again, if you have time to listen to his Magnificat in D later this afternoon, I would encourage you to do that.

But here in Mary's song, which is being sung 30 weeks before Bethlehem and really 30 years before the cross of Good Friday or the empty tomb of Easter Sunday, Mary sounds out the gospel of God.

And so on this second Sunday of Advent, we do well to listen to Mary. We do well to explore her amazing song.

And I want to do that under three headings. To talk about the celebration of God, the character of God, and the covenant of God. Okay, so we're going to talk about the celebration of God, the character of God, and the covenant of God.

First of all, let's think together about the celebration of God. In that first verse, it says in verse 39, At that time, Mary got ready and she hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.

[5 : 39] And just as a reminder of the context, here's this young woman. Her name's Mary or Miriam or Maria or any version of that that we have here even in our church. And she's just received this visit from the angel Gabriel with a message from the Lord.

This word of divine revelation that God is going to do a wonderful work. That God is going to make the impossible possible. And that she, a virgin, is going to conceive a child by the power of the Holy Spirit and give birth to a son.

And if that's not unbelievable enough and just doesn't cause our minds to explode, this is no ordinary son. As we heard in the passage last week, his identity is that he's the son not just of Mary, he's the son of the Most High.

He's the eternally begotten, preexistent son of God. And his name is to be Jesus. A name which means Yahweh saves.

Yahweh is salvation. And he, the angel Gabriel, says to Mary, he's going to reign on the throne of King David. And his kingdom will never, ever come to an end.

[6 : 55] Can you imagine being Mary and getting this message? It's unbelievable. And Mary's response, as Andrew talked about last week, is really a model of how to live by faith.

She says, I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled. Just this simple, beautiful faith that's absolutely inspiring. But what happens next?

Right? What happens after that? Well, the angel Gabriel told Mary that her older relative Elizabeth, who is barren and beyond childbearing age, is pregnant.

And so Mary goes on a road trip. And she goes to see Elizabeth, the soon-to-be mother of John the baptizer.

Now, the Bible doesn't tell us Mary's age. I would encourage you to imagine her as maybe 15 years old, 16, 17 years old.

[7 : 54] And she goes and she makes this trip, hoping that Elizabeth will believe her unbelievable story. And hoping that Elizabeth might give her some support and some help.

And what happens when these two believers meet together? It's absolutely amazing. Mary arrives. She enters the home. And the baby in Elizabeth's womb, John the prophet, leaps for joy because the baby in Mary's womb, Jesus the Messiah, is here.

And then Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit gives her prophetic insight. And she speaks words of prophetic truth and prophetic faith to Mary.

And she says this in verse 42. In a loud voice she exclaimed, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear. But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

And then in verse 45, Blessed is she who is believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her. Think about that. Mary, at this point, has been visited by an angelic messenger.

[9 : 08] She has received a word of divine revelation. But it's not until she hears these words from Elizabeth that she begins to sing her song.

Now why is that? What did she, Mary, hear from Elizabeth that made her burst into song? Well, Elizabeth says, First of all, the Lord has spoken promises to you about this child.

And secondly, the child in your womb is my Lord. Filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth says, The Lord God promised this child.

And the child is my Lord. So which is it? Is the Lord the one who promised the baby? Or is the Lord the baby? And the answer, of course, is yes.

This is proto-Trinitarian theology. God the Holy Spirit reveals the truth about God the Father and God the Son through Elizabeth to Mary.

[10 : 10] And it causes the penny to drop for Mary. Then she begins to sing those words, prophetic truth and prophetic faith, back to Elizabeth. My soul rejoices.

My soul magnifies. It glorifies the Lord. And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. It's this beautiful, beautiful picture of the power of a believing community.

It's a beautiful picture of our need for fellowship with sisters and with brothers who will speak the truth about God by the power of the Holy Spirit to us. And the question as we come to this text is, who are the people speaking into your life with words of prophetic truth and prophetic faith that help you, like Mary, trust in the promises of God?

We need each other. We deeply need each other. Because suddenly, it all comes together for Mary. All these missing pieces of the puzzle are put in place because this other believer, Elizabeth, confirms the truth for Mary.

And so she bursts into song. My soul glorifies the Lord. And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. She's moved in the very depth and center of her being and begins pouring out her heart of praise and adoration to God.

[11 : 28] Which is what happens when the good news of salvation alights upon a soul. But notice that Mary is not singing alone. She's not singing off by herself.

Mary's song is not just being sung to God. It's being shared with Elizabeth. Mary praised God to Elizabeth. Mary's beautiful poetic hymn is sung from one grateful soul to another.

And this is something I think that we need to think about. That there's something special, deeply special about the corporate nature of our gatherings in this church and in our homes.

Our shared worship experiences that bring out the reality and the significance of our words about God. The Apostle Paul says this in Colossians 3.16.

He says, Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms and hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

[12 : 34] Paul says, He says, Teach and admonish one another through psalms and hymns and songs from the Spirit, even as you are singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

And can you imagine how encouraging it must have been for Elizabeth to hear Mary singing? How encouraging it must have been to her faith to hear this younger believer singing this song of faith in God, even in the midst of what would certainly be for Mary a time of great difficulty and trouble.

You know, one of the primary ways that we can encourage and strengthen one another in the faith and spur one another on toward love and good deeds is through our singing. When we know that people around us are going through a deep and dark valley, and yet they're singing from their heart, My shepherd will supply my need.

When we know that there are people sitting next to us that are persevering incredible trials and deep sorrows, and yet they're singing out, It is well with my soul.

How encouraging is that for our own faith? And this is why we worked so hard to, honestly, just to dial down the volume of our musicians up here on the platform, so that we can dial up the volume of the people in the pews, and you can be encouraged by hearing the songs of your brothers and sisters singing out prophetic truth and prophetic faith from their real and messy lives.

[14 : 20] And notice that it says that Elizabeth says, She exclaimed with a loud voice to Mary. And so she exclaimed with a loud voice to Mary. How do you think Mary responded to Elizabeth?

Do you think Mary sang her song in this ho-hum, quiet, unenthusiastic way? Not at all. Again and again in the Bible, the loudness and the greatness of the volume with which we sing is associated with the greatness of that which is being proclaimed and that which is being sung.

And so I just want to encourage you to think about Elizabeth and Mary, this beautiful community of believers, showing us how it's done, showing us how to build one another up in the faith through prophetic truth and prophetic singing.

Isn't that thrilling? I find it quite encouraging. The celebration of God, right? But this is not only about the celebration of God, it's also about the character of God.

The character of God. I hear people say, particularly here in the Bay Area, you hear people say this a lot, that I cannot trust the Bible because it's patriarchal and it's misogynistic.

[15:38] When I hear that, I struggle and I have a question, which is, are there any biographies in the ancient world that open with two women talking theology with each other?

I've been studying this for a long time. I've done a deep dive. I have not yet found one example from the ancient world where this is happening.

And Mary's song, it's the longest sequence of words spoken by any woman in the New Testament. And the reason it's put here in the very first chapter of the gospel is because her themes are going to be woven through the whole story and really you'll see them showing up time and time again in the preaching and teaching of her son, Jesus.

And so I just want to say that Jesus is very good news for women. Ladies, that's where you should at least say amen. I don't know about the guys, but Jesus Christ is the best news for women.

And here you have this female theologian at the very beginning of this gospel and what is she proclaiming? She says, And then she says in verse 49, Now, Protestant Christians tend to not give Mary the honor that she deserves, even though she says here, from now on all generations will call me blessed and we should call her blessed.

[17:18] But on the other hand, Catholic Christians tend to elevate Mary to be someone who's like sinless and they call her the queen of heaven, even though Mary says, I'm just a humble servant rejoicing in my savior.

And of course, only sinners need a savior. And so I want you to see, whether you're Protestant, Catholic, no religion whatsoever, that this song is really not about Mary.

It's just a song about God. And true worship doesn't draw attention to oneself. True worship points to God. And Mary, when she contemplates the truth of the incarnation, the truth that the Lord of heaven and earth is being made flesh in her womb, and that the Son of God has left the courts of heaven to come and bring the kingdom of God and the salvation of God and the rule and the reign of God into this world, she says, my soul, the effect of that truth on my soul is that my soul glorifies or magnifies the Lord.

Magnificat. Right? To magnify is to make large. To magnify is to make great. And Mary's saying that each of us has the power to act as a lens by which God is made greater or lesser in the eyes and in the estimate of other people.

And Mary wants God to be seen and to be known for who he truly is. She wants his character to be painted on an enormous canvas in a large way that the whole world might see and bow down before God in adoration and praise.

[19:00] My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior. The Greek says my spirit rejoices exceedingly. My spirit exalts. My spirit boasts.

My spirit is not ashamed but is in fact quite proud that the Lord is not just a Savior and he's not even just the Savior but the Lord is my Savior.

Mary's eyes are not at all on herself. She's focused on who God is and what God is doing which is filling her with humility. Mary is completely forgetting herself in this moment.

And what is it that moves her? What makes her sing and worship? What fills her with astonishment and adoration is this. She gets insight into the inner meaning of God my Savior.

Into the inner meaning of salvation and why it is that God is bringing his son through her womb into the world. And here's what she says in verse 49.

[20:01] For the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. She says, first of all, thinking about the character of God, she says God is the mighty one.

Verse 51, he performs mighty deeds with his arm. The one who powerfully created everything out of nothing. The one who saved Israel from slavery in Egypt.

The one who has proven himself strong and a strong Savior on behalf of those who are weak and vulnerable. On behalf of those who are helpless and hopeless. He is demonstrating his power

through this Holy Spirit-conceded, virgin-born son of God.

The Almighty is showing through this child in utero the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes. And Mary says not only is his character one, he's one who is mighty, but she says his name is holy.

Holy is his name. Why, Mary says, is the Lord, God my Savior, sending his son to be born in this cradle and ultimately to die on a cross?

[21 : 22] Answer, because he's holy. Because God is eternally opposite of sin. He's eternally opposed to sin. He hates sin. He made this world and he saw that it was good, it was perfect, there was nothing wrong about it, there was no blemish on it, but sin came in and evil became widespread and it ruined creation and God.

This holy God absolutely cannot tolerate sin. And he will not leave the world as it is in sin and under the power of the evil one because his name is holy.

And he must rid his creation of all that is unholy. And this, by the way, is why the Lord, God, is sending his son not to be conceived by a sinner, but to be conceived by this spirit that is holy because Jesus is to be holy.

Jesus is utterly separated from sin. There is no sin in him. God is holy and the Son of God is holy. And Mary, magnifying the character of God, enlarging and expanding on the character of God, she says not only is he mighty and not only is he holy, but he is also merciful.

Verse 50, his mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. Verse 54, he is remembered to be merciful. You see, if God were only the mighty one and if God were only the holy one, then none of us would be here this morning.

[22 : 58] He would have blotted all of us out. He would have judged us and destroyed us already. There would be no salvation. But he is merciful and gracious.

And he is sending his son Jesus into the world and he's sending Jesus to the cross to wipe out sin without wiping out us sinners. He's sending his son Jesus in the world not to bring judgment upon us, but to bear judgment for us.

He's sending his son in the womb of the Virgin Mary to take all of our unholiness onto himself and to put all of his holiness onto us.

And this is why we call God a God of mercy and a God of grace toward us who are totally undeserving of this gift.

This is why Jesus laid aside his eternal glory. It's why he emptied himself and humbled himself and lowered himself to show us the unsearchable and boundless riches of the mercy and the grace of God toward us.

[24 : 09] And if you're here today and you're exploring Christianity, my question for you today is, have you encountered, have you truly encountered the character, the authentic character of this God who is at one time mighty and holy and merciful?

And how open are you to letting his mercy come into your life? And if you're a Christian here today, my question for you is, is your soul bursting like Mary's soul is bursting to tell other people about how merciful your Savior is.

Right? He's mighty and he's holy, but he's merciful. See, Mary, this is all about the celebration of God and it's all about the character of God.

But finally, I want to point out, it's also all about the covenant of God. Mary's song is all about the covenant of God. It's striking to me the way that Mary's mind, this young woman in the youth group, her mind is saturated by the scriptures.

Right? There are at least, we can't go into this, but there are at least 10 quotations and allusions to the Bible in her song. Psalm 22, Psalm 25, Psalm 44, Psalm 89, Psalm 98, Psalm 103, Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2, phrases from Isaiah and Job.

[25 : 35] Basically, Mary just pillages the Bible to come up with words of praise to give back to God. Clearly, she had a dad, she had a mom, she had teachers, she had mentors who encouraged her to soak in and memorize the scriptures so that when this moment came, you know, when the moment of truth comes in your life, you're ready.

You're prepared to express the truth about God and that out of the abundance of your heart, your mouth just speaks and she's able to articulate herself in the language of the Bible.

It's one of the great evidences of God's grace in our lives is our love for his word and Mary has an evidence of that grace in her life. And so she says this, I mean, what teenager says this?

In verse 54, he has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever just as he promised to our ancestors.

What Mary says there is that God is not only mighty and he's not only holy and he's not only merciful, but he's also faithful to his covenant promises that he made to Abraham and to his people. [26 : 49] And I want you to hear this, that Mary sees herself and she sees her life as part of a larger story. Right?

Mary's sense of identity and her sense of belonging, Mary's sense of meaning and her sense of purpose is not rooted and grounded in herself.

It's not at all rooted and grounded in her inner world and her sense of autonomous individuality. No, she is anchored and she's centered on the promises that God has made to his people.

You think about that mother promise in Genesis 3.15, right, where God promises, he says, I'm going to send the offspring of the woman and he's going to be terribly wounded and yet he's going to crush the head of the serpent.

You think about Genesis 12 to 22, these great promises that God gave to Abraham and his people that they would be like the stars in the sky and the sand of the seashore.

[27 : 52] They'd be unable, you'd be unable to count them. There'd be so many of them and that through Abraham and through his family, blessing would flow out to all the nations of the world.

When Mary's singing about this promise, it's a 2,000-year-old promise. Mary's read all the prophets. She's thinking about all those promises that God made through the prophets to send his Messiah to come and to redeem his people.

And Mary, in this moment, she sees that what is happening to her and what is happening through her son is all about the God who makes and keeps his promises.

And friends, that's what healthy spirituality is, is about trusting in the promises of God. We walk by faith, yes, but our faith leans on God's promises and all of his promises can bear all the weight that we put upon them.

Like Mary, we can lean on them confidently because our covenant God in his covenant faithfulness will do all that he said he will do, even if we have to wait 2,000 years for him to bring things to completion and fulfillment.

[29 : 02] And you see, when Mary read the prophets, when Mary read her Bible, when Mary read about all those covenant promises that God made about his Messiah coming to redeem his people, she got this picture of total reversal.

She read her Bible and she saw this picture of God turning everything upside down. She knew that when God sent his Messiah, the exalted would be humbled and the humble would be exalted.

And unsurprisingly, this is exactly what Mary says in verse 51. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but he has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful. Mary asks this question. She says, who is it who will be scattered completely until there's nothing left?

[30 : 14] Who is it that will be brought down? Who is it that will be sent away empty? It's people who are proud in their inmost thoughts, people who say to themselves, I am sufficient, I am complete in myself, I do not need God.

Mary says, if you are proud about your position, if you're proud about your power, she says, if you're full of yourself, you're going to be sent away empty. If you exalt yourself, she says, you are going to be humbled.

But then Mary asks the question, she says, who is it that will be lifted up? Who is it that will be filled? Who is it that will be helped? She says it's the humble and the hungry.

It's people whose need, people whose poverty of spirit and desperation is driving them to God, driving them to put their faith in God, driving them to fear God.

It's people like Elizabeth. It's people like Mary. These women with no wealth, no position, no power, the most unlikely people in terms of the power structures of this world, Mary says, if you're exalted, you're going to be humbled.

[31 : 28] And if you're humble, you're going to be exalted. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they're going to receive the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they're going to inherit the whole earth.

Blessed are those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they are the ones who are going to be filled. God uses the humble. God uses the lowly. God uses the weak things of this world to show his power.

And when the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords came into this world, how did he come? He came humble. He came into a lowly girl from Nazareth.

He came into a stable and a feeding trough for animals. Right? When God sent his son to save humanity, how did he come? He came as a vulnerable baby. He came as an ordinary blue-collar worker.

He came as a man nailed to a cross. He came humble. And he was totally reversing everything we thought about the way the world worked. He was totally turning our value structures upside down.

[32 : 35] And all the people who were proud in their inmost thoughts, they did not recognize the truth when it was standing incarnate before their eyes. And even today, in spite of ample historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, in spite of the ample historical evidence for the reliability of the New Testament, many, many people who are proud in their inmost thoughts would rather trust in themselves rather than trusting in their maker and the one he sent for our salvation.

salvation. And Mary poses this question to all who would listen to her. She says, do you want to receive mercy? Or do you want to be scattered completely and brought down and sent away empty?

Mary of Nazareth, this little amazing woman of faith, this mother of our Lord, she invites us and she challenges us. She says, surrender your pride.

Surrender your pride to God today. Fear him. Humble yourself before him. And he will exalt you. He will lift you up.

He will fill you. He will help you. He will save you. My soul glorifies the Lord, she says. My spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.

[34 : 00] Oh, that we would sing that song with Mary. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.