A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

“*A Magnifying Soul*”

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Luke 1:39

The meeting between the two cousins, young virgin Mary and old barren Elizabeth is one of the sweetest moments in the Bible. Bursting into the house, young Mary is miraculously, supernaturally pregnant. Her life has been totally changed. Greeting her is old Elizabeth, who is also miraculously, supernaturally pregnant. Her life has been totally changed too. With these two women hand-in-hand, sharing their unquenchable, certainly unexpected wonder at the barely explainable mystery that has overcome them, it’s like a small pebble has been dropped into pond of the universe. These two women are the first to notice the ripples beginning to radiate out. Something has changed, something important and before the ripples reach the consciousness of the rest of the world, these two women share a secret together.

It’s hard to imagine that they really understood what was happening . . .what God was doing and that their two children, Jesus and John, would together change the world. No parent of an unborn baby understands what is happening to them much less what their child is going to become. Say what you want about carefully laid plans, or Beethoven in the belly, or nature vs. nurture, it’s all a tenuous and wonderful mystery that will only be revealed in its time, when it’s time. Whatever hopes and dreams we may have for our children, it’s all future tense . . .what she will be like, what he will do, who she will look more like, who he will take after. It’s all future tense—yet to be realized, but only played out in our imaginations. It’s hard to imagine that in any circumstances, and certainly not the one they found themselves in, that old Elizabeth and young Mary knew what was going on much less what would go on.

And yet, it’s amazing how much they did seem to understand. Like a wise and generous elder Elizabeth sees beyond the moment and blesses Mary with words by which Mary will be blessed from that time forward until today, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. . . .blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

Elizabeth praises Mary for Mary’s faith that she had when the pebble first was dropped in her pond—when the angel told her strange things about a baby being born to her and how the baby was to be the Son of the Most High and sit on the throne of David. Mary actually believed what she heard. And now, about three months later, it’s undeniable by now that her body is changing and maybe the whole world with it, and Elizabeth praises Mary for believing what she could not see back then. “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’

Mary deserves praise for many reasons. She certainly exhibits faith in a pure form—to believe what you cannot see, to confess it with your lips and believe it in your heart, and to be willing to give your life for something that has not yet been proven, nor has it been shown that the way will be easy. That’s why we call them steps of faith or leaps of faith—you step forward when you can’t see the way before you. That’s faith. Mary had that faith and submitted herself to God and that changed everything . . .for her and the world. “Blessed are you among women.”

It’s been said that more cathedrals have been built in Mary’s name than in another name, even the name of Jesus. While she may be a bit overlooked in some traditions, perhaps even our own, Mary has certainly been honored far beyond what she could have possibly imagined even while Elizabeth was heaping praise on her.

Mary does represent the best of humanity’s response to God. There are far too many examples of humanity’s depravity, idolatry, pride, and sin—all of the reasons why we need a Savior in the first place—but Mary is us at our best. God comes to humanity and, in Mary, humanity says, I am your handmaiden, let it be to me according to your word. In Mary, humanity submitted itself as the temple of God and received God and God’s salvation with joy and faith and hope. Blessed is she indeed and by her we all are blessed.

Then Mary speaks. “My soul magnifies the Lord” Mary responds to Elizabeth’s praise. “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.” It’s a powerful phrase, this “my soul magnifies the Lord.”

The most obvious sense of ‘magnify’ is to make bigger, to enlarge. But how would one enlarge God? How would one make God bigger? I don’t mean to ask pointless questions of poetic prayer, but it is an evocative phrase . . .how does one magnify God when God is . . .already . . .God? What could Mary or anyone do to make the God of the Universe any bigger, any grander, any more expansive that God already is? Even if in some strange existence, God could be bigger than God already is and if God were somehow changeable, how would a human effect the expansion of God anyway? How would a soul ‘magnify’ the Lord? Seeing that these are impossible questions, we return puzzled to Mary’s profession—my soul magnifies the Lord.

But when we do, we remember that to magnify isn’t just to make something bigger, it’s to make something appear bigger, closer, more in focus. That which is magnified overcomes all else in our attention as long as it is magnified in our vision.

Think of the magnifying glass that someone handed you when you were a kid. You put your eye up to that thing like a young Sherlock Holmes and go looking in the grass for bugs and boom! That which was tiny now is huge. . . That which you couldn’t see too well, now you can see full well. That which was only one part of your field of view now becomes the only focus you have as long as you hold that thing up to your eye and as long as you focus on that bug.

Think of the first time you put your eye to a magnifying glass in science class and looked into that little petri dish at the shrimp brine or something. Didn’t look like much was there when you first looked, but magnify it 10x or 100x and now you see what you couldn’t see before, partly because you closed your sight to everything else but that which you were focused on as long as you kept your eye there.

Think of the first time you put your eye to a telescope. You had been looking up into the night sky at the round flat moon. Now through the lens, you see the contours of the hills, the shades of the moon surface. You see the details, largely because you don’t see anything else.

But the bug you saw didn’t change, your perception did. The shrimp brine didn’t change either, your ability to see did. The moon didn’t change, your focus did. To magnify doesn’t change the object of magnification—it changes your relationship to that thing. And if what you magnify is important enough, it changes you. Well, when it’s a bug, or shrimp brine, or even the moon, it probably doesn’t change you that much, just changes the way you see something, your perception.

But if, just if, what you magnify isn’t shrimp brine, but what if the magnifier of your being were to be centered on God, and not just as a lab experiment but as the centering of your being, then what? How would that change you?

Our souls are nothing if they are not our God-given magnifiers. The soul is the sacred center of our being, hungry for meaning and purpose and in search of something to believe in and hope in and find home in. The soul is only satisfied with its own journey of transformation to knowing itself and seeing God.

Parker Palmer, who has such wonderful insights into the language of the soul, said this, “most of us arrive at a sense of self . . .only after a long journey through alien lands. But this journey bears no resemblance to the trouble-free’ travel packages’ sold by the tourism industry. It is more akin to the ancient tradition of pilgrimage— ‘a transformative journey to a sacred center’ full of hardship, darkness, and peril. In the tradition of pilgrimage (and I would add the tradition of Advent), those hardships are seen not as accidental but as integral to the journey itself. Treacherous terrain, bad weather, taking a fall, getting lost—challenges of that sort, largely beyond our control, can strip the ego of the illusion that it is in charge and make space for the true self to emerge. If that happens, the pilgrim has a better chance to find the sacred center he or she seeks. Disabused of our illusions by much travel and travail, we awaken one day to find that the sacred center is here and now—in every moment of the journey, everywhere in the world around us, and deep in our hearts.” (Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*)

It is as this point, the moment when God is near, where young Mary becomes a wise teacher for all of us. Just as the moment when her journey, her faith, her blessedness, her chosen-ness . . .just at the moment when it all could have been about her or her somewhat awkward circumstances, when she could have become very important in her own eyes, when any number of things could have been magnified to Mary, she confesses, “my soul magnifies the Lord.’ Instead of Mary or a hundred other things becoming larger in Mary’s eyes, instead of what Mary was doing and what Mary represented being large in Mary’s eyes, the Lord was magnified in Mary’s eyes. It’s as if Elizabeth had said, “Mary you are so wonderful and blessed.” To which Mary replied, “thank you, but honestly, in these moments, what I have experienced is that my soul magnifies, not myself, not my circumstance, not my plans, but all I can see when I see any of this is Lord.”

It’s not that Mary could make God bigger than God already was. Even Mary couldn’t change God. But God could change Mary, and she was. it’s that for Mary the Lord now filled her field of vision. Above all else, before all else, the Lord is magnified in my soul.

Whatever is magnified in your soul is the thing that will define everything else in your life. It’s the lens through which you see everything else. It’s the frame by which everything else is framed. It doesn’t mean everything else isn’t there—we have a capacity to hold more than one thing at a time—but it’s that by which everything else is ordered.

Psalm 70 prays, “Let all those that seek You rejoice and be glad in you, and let those who love your salvation say continually: Let God be magnified.”

So yes, let us pray as those who love God’s salvation, “Let God be magnified.” Let us say it every morning. Let God be magnified in me today. Let us say it through every tragedy, Let God somehow be magnified in this. Let us say it in every moment of shared joy—let God be magnified in us.

The reality is that this is a gift, this sense that God is so close that we see everything through the nearness of God. Even the most prayerful, devoted, spiritually oriented people have times when God seems far, far away. So we remember that it’s not a question of our feelings, it’s faith that clings to God coming near. It’s not unlike the faith of Mary or of Elizabeth or of the countless others who have clung to their faith even when they were way off any road map they’d ever known.

There’s an old Irish prayer rooted in the nearness of God in Christ. As we celebrate the moment when God came near to us in Christ and pray for God’s nearness to overwhelm us, overtake us, overcome us just as it did Mary, hear this prayer:

Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me. Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

I bind unto myself the Name, The strong Name of the Trinity, By invocation of the same, The Three in One and One in Three. By Whom all nature hath creation, Eternal Father, Spirit, Word: Praise to the Lord of my salvation, Salvation is of Christ the Lord.

Let us say in everything, Let God be magnified in my soul. Let that which is most true about myself be wholly overtaken by God’s presence. And may my soul, like Mary’s once before, be the instrument through which the invisible is made visible in the world.

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