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Luke 1:26-55

MAGNIFICATION MOMENTS

It is very puzzling how anyone could read Luke's gospel account of Mary and come away thinking of her as "meek and mild." Unfortunately, down through the ages, this is just how the Christian Church has portrayed the mother of Jesus. She is seen as meek and demure, her eyes cast down, her posture one of submission. We still see this image of her—in paintings and on Christmas cards.

But did you listen to her song? Did you *hear* what she sang about in the Magnificat? Mary was an agitator. We could think of Mary as being something like those protest leaders you see at marches, those shouting into a megaphone with chants for justice. Mary sings about a complete reversal of the social order of things: when God will bring down the proud and the powerful and will lift up the lowly, when God will reverse the economic inequalities. Could it be Mary was a socialist?

Whatever name you want to call her, Mary's song, this one we listened to today, has been considered so revolutionary that three authoritarian governments in history have actually banned its public recitation for fear of what it might incite. Some people have been critical of how passive Mary is portrayed in scriptures. But that is a clear misinterpretation. Instead of passive, what we see here in Luke's account is a young woman who says yes to God's plan and then becomes a *participant* in God's liberating activity in the world. Instead of passive, Mary becomes engaged in what God is doing.

That is exactly what Mary is trying to do in her song—to highlight what God is doing. We call her song "The Magnificat" because of the words she uses at the beginning of her song:

“my soul *magnifies* the Lord.” Think about what a magnifying glass does. It *enlarges*. A magnifying glass helps us see things better. That is what Mary is trying to do with her song: she is enlarging our ability to see the amazing, wondrous things God is doing—especially through the coming birth of her child.

Through the singing of her song, Mary hands each and every one of us a magnifying glass so we may see things differently. We may not realize it, but in life we often carry around our own magnifying glass. Some folks look around them and focus their attention on all the horrible, terrible, sad, and cruel events in life. And it’s pretty hard to avoid hearing about such things. Whether it is Covid-19 or deadly tornados or sexual misconduct on a massive scale, the news is filled with stories of terrible things. And our own lives know their share of hardships and misfortunes. So, it *is* easy to focus our attention on life’s adversities and injustices. When, however, such events claim the majority of our attention, we can be vulnerable to despair and depression, to bitterness and cynicism.

On the other hand, some people go through life striving to avoid the bad news by magnifying only what is pleasant and nice. Have you known such people—those whose strategy is to just focus on what is nice? The problem with this strategy is that it is divorced from reality. This approach is detached from the world and the hurting people of this world.

But Mary offers us a different magnifying glass. Mary gives us a magnifying glass that enlarges our understanding of the good God is doing *to* the bad. God is confronting the injustices, God is healing the wounded places, God is restoring the damaged spirits, God is transforming the human heart. Mary magnifies the goodness of God so that we might see it and from seeing it we might have hope.

That is the gift Mary gives us in Advent—the gift of hope by helping us see how God is transforming what is broken and wounded and wrong within us and around us. Mary’s song foreshadows the work of Jesus, the one whose *life* will magnify God’s holy way—a way defined by justice for all people, radical forgiveness, unconditional love, compassion for the weak, service to others, and abundant generosity.

There is one sentence in Mary’s song that for me captures the essence of her message. In magnifying all the things God has done and is doing, Mary sings that God “has filled the hungry with good things.” Filling the hungry with good things. That is the Christian mission. Jesus literally filled hungry people’s bellies with bread, but he also addressed so many other hungers: when he offered God’s love and acceptance to those excluded and rejected, when he called for justice for the oppressed, when he extended mercy and forgiveness to sinners, when he offered compassion to those overcome with sorrow and hope to those filled with despair. And to everyone hungering for meaning and purpose, Jesus fed them with the holy way of God. Jesus’ entire ministry was about filling the hungry with good things.

I know that you are hungry for good things. And I am hungry for good things. And all around us are people hungry for good things. So here is the good news, the very thing Mary was singing about: Christmas is about God coming to fill us with good things. God is active, present, and at work filling us with good things. And we can join Mary in becoming engaged in the good things God is doing.

And I see this happening a lot at UPC. When you volunteer at the food pantry, you fill the hungry with good things. And when you send Christmas cards to those incarcerated and birthday cards to one another, you fill the hungry with good things. When you make donations to help resettle refugees and take a meal to someone who is ill, and knit a shawl for someone

who is grieving, the hungry are filled with good things. When you write letters to government leaders and join vigils on behalf of the powerless, you are seeking to fill the hungry with good things. There are hungry people everywhere, and each act of kindness, compassion, justice, and mercy is a way of magnifying God.

Judy Betz shared with the Adult class a moment she witnessed at the grocery store recently. She was in line at the register behind an elderly woman who was taking a long time with the cashier. Things were going slowly and the line behind Judy grew longer and longer as people waited for this woman to finish up with her purchases. But then the customer suddenly said, "Oh wait, I need one more thing." Judy thought the people behind her were going to erupt as the older woman got out of line to fetch a gift card from the rack. And then, after the cashier rang up the gift card and the woman paid for it, the customer handed the gift card back to the cashier and said, "This is for you. I used to do this job and I know what you are going through." And then she walked away, leaving everyone completely stunned. It was a moment of magnification. Filling the hungry with good things can be as basic and as life-giving as seeing the people who are so often overlooked and acknowledging their humanity.

Magnification moments are when we make the goodness of God known and seen. We listen to Mary sing her solo today but her song is really an invitation to us to stand with her to form a choir of singers. And the magnification of the Lord shall be our song.