

April 29, 2018
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Luke
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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MY SOUL MAGNIFIES THE LORD Luke 1:39-56

Mary's Canticle or song of praise has been put to music many times over the centuries. It is a significant part of the liturgy of the Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Church alike, intended to be sung or recited by priests and laymen alike. It is also sung by many Protestant denomination churches especially during the Christmas season. The words have been put to music as varied as Bach's famous *Magnificat* to the rock group U-2's *Magnificent*. A quick listen to both of those pieces quickly leads to the conclusion that the songs are about two completely distinct and even opposing ideas.

Most of the music, poems, and prayers that have flowed from this passage of Scripture appear to focus on Mary, who the text says is *blessed among women* and who will be blessed by future generations. But, even a quick reading of the text reveals that from the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth through the *Magnificat*, it is all about God's mercy, grace, and faithfulness.

This is a song about God's justice to knock down the proud and haughty and to exalt the humble and down trodden. It is a song about God's intent to keep His promises. It is, therefore, a song about the joys of being chosen to be the humble servant of the Lord.

Darrel Block observed in this text: "Humility is the natural product of reflection about who God is. In the ancient world, relationship with God was no casual affair, as if God were a friendly neighbor. Rather, it was seen as an honor, and it called for a deep sense of respect, much like a person might respond to hosting a famous dignitary. After all, he is the Creator, who is responsible for our being a part of his creation." (Darrel L. Block, *The NIV*

Application Commentary, "Luke," Terry Muck, ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996, p.67.)

This song speaks to all of us about God's amazing grace to send us the Savior for our sins, and beyond that, to kindly draw us to the Savior so that we can be released from our guilt of sin. It is a wonderful reminder that we servants of the Lord have been greatly blessed so that we should respond by blessing the Lord greatly as we trust Him implicitly.

Blessed is the Servant of the Lord (vv.39-45).

This text begins with the narrative of two of the Lord's servants meeting (vv.39-40). One of the Lord's servants was young, in the flower of her youth. *In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah (v.39).*

Mary was a young woman to say the least. If we actually knew how young she was we would probably be shocked. According to the evidence we have about ancient traditions, parents would enter into betrothal contracts for their daughters when they were around twelve to fourteen years old. Those betrothal periods typically lasted for a year. Therefore, it is possible, and even likely, that Mary was at the most fifteen years old at this point.

The scant evidence of the story does indicate that she was very mature for her age compared to young ladies in our culture. Probably most young women were. For example, Mary trusted what Gabriel told her and responded with humility considering herself to be the servant of the Lord, willing to accept whatever God chose for her. That reveals great maturity. She was also mature physically as she immediately set out on a 80-100 mile trip that would take a minimum of three days travel through some very rugged countryside. Surely she didn't go alone! No, probably she didn't. It is likely that she traveled with a group or various groups heading south, which would have been a common situation.

At the very least, we can conclude that servant Mary was very young but mature in her trust of God. She went to visit one more mature servant whose bloom had vanished. Mary headed to the hills of Judea *and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth (v.40).* As the story has already made clear, Elizabeth was

beyond normal child-bearing years. Be that as it may, she shared the miracle of God with Mary her relative. Elizabeth was too old to bear children, but she and husband conceived according to biological norms. Mary was too young (in our opinion) to bear children but conceived miraculously as a virgin carrying the Holy Spirit's child.

Those are both difficult circumstances. Therefore, God, being merciful like He is, sent Gabriel to encourage Mary with the news that her relative was also with child miraculously. *And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God (Luke 1:36-37).* Was Elizabeth even aware that her young relative was with child, yeah, about to give birth to Messiah? It appears that Mary headed south very soon after learning the news. She had no telephone, telegraph, or social media by which to communicate the good news to Elizabeth. It seems amazing, but it is likely that this "visitation" was the first knowledge Elizabeth had that Mary was with child.

God was doing astonishing things for these two women. Therefore, their response was all about God's grace and mercy. One servant began his ministry early (vv.41-45). John rejoiced to hear Mary's voice. *And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit (v.41).* Later in the conversation, mother Elizabeth confirmed her baby's response, *For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy (v.44).*

Surely at six months along, Elizabeth had felt John move, turn, and kick many times. But this movement on baby John's part was very different. John responded to Mary's voice according to the work God ordained for him to do. Concerning John's work, Gabriel had promised Zechariah: *And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared (Luke 1:16-17).* God's promise through Gabriel was that John's ministry was wholly, intrinsically connected with the Lord of God's people—Jesus Christ.

What is almost shocking is that John responded before his mother did. By the power and ministry of the Holy Spirit, six month

old fetus John recognized days' old embryo Jesus as the Christ. He leapt for joy even as a baby in the womb knowing that his service to the Lord was to make Him known. As a six month old fetus, weighing about 1½ pounds, John felt emotions. He responded with great joy to hear that Jesus' mother just showed up with Jesus in her womb. This response from John was the same all his life as near the end of his life he would confess: *The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete (John 3:29).*

Already, while still in the womb, John was preparing the way of the Lord, turning hearts and thoughts toward Him. That is because he was already filled with the Holy Spirit (1:15). Now John's mother was filled with the Holy Spirit. This is God's typical means for empowering His servants to do His work.

The Holy Spirit's testimony focused on God's blessing on Mary. Overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit, Mary's relative prophesied. *And she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (vv.42-43).* No doubt Elizabeth was still very excited that she, the old woman, was going to have a baby. But at this moment she was so overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit's work that she could only talk about the amazing work of God's grace in Mary's life. Obviously, Elizabeth never entertained the idea that Mary had been promiscuous.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth proclaimed that Mary is *Mother of my Lord*. The joy was not about Mary but about the Lord Jesus and God the Father who was blessing her. Only through God's work was Elizabeth able to recognize that the days' old child in Mary's womb was none other than the promised Messiah. Maybe at the moment the reality of Psalm 110:1 dawned on her. *The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool" (Psalm 110:1).*

How much of the Lord's blessing can you handle? What is your response to the Lord's blessings? Mary, being blessed by God, believed God. Elizabeth called this matter to mind. *And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord (v.45).* Mary was a bit unlike Zechariah whom God

chastened because he was not believing God. One cannot help but wonder if, in this story, Zechariah was close by to hear this testimony of faith and was rebuked by it.

What faith this young servant of the Lord, Mary, demonstrated. What care for the young servant God demonstrated. He sent Gabriel the messenger. He provided Elizabeth, the much more mature seasoned saint, to encourage Mary. He afforded faith to Mary.

Faith Blesses the Lord (vv.46-56).

The last several verses of our text show how the recipient of God's blessing is right to turn around and pile blessing on the Lord. This section is typically called "Mary's Magnificat." The title or name comes from the phrase "My Soul Magnifies the Lord." It is the first Christmas Carol in the New Testament. Alexander Graham Scroggie calls this one of the last Old Testament psalms and the first New Testament hymn. Luke gave us three other Christmas hymns: Zechariah's *Benedictus* (Luke 1:68-79); The Angels' *Gloria* (Luke 2:13-14); Simeon's *Song of Dismissal* (Luke 2:29-32). That makes Luke the Church's first hymn writer.

It is important to note that this song draws heavily on much of the Old Testament. The text is very similar to Hannah's song (1 Samuel 2:1, 7-8) which reads: *My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in the LORD. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation. . . . The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and on them he has set the world (1 Samuel 2:1,7-8).* Mary's Magnificat also draws on truths from Genesis, Deuteronomy, 1 and 2 Samuel, Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah, Habakkuk and Zephaniah.

The song teaches us important lessons about music that is used to praise God. Our hymns ought to be rich in Bible language. If we are going to sing about God's amazing grace, we do well to sing Bible truths not just sing about personal emotional experience. Mary certainly was on an emotional high at this point in her life, but her song is pure Scripture. Of course there is criticism: "How could a

teenager come up with a song like this?" She obviously knew her Bible well. She was being carried along by the Holy Spirit while she spoke (2 Peter 1:20-21).

By unpacking the details of Mary's song, we discover that it is a song about faith in the Lord (vv.46-47). The song teaches first of all that faith exalts the Lord, or as Mary put it, "It magnifies the Lord." *And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord" (v.46).* It is interesting that Mary's song is not, "O happy day, I'm going to have a baby!" She didn't even focus on the wonderful gift but on the giver of the gift. Her focus is on Her Lord.

With her soul, Mary made the Lord large. To magnify is to make large, exalt, place above. Most of the time (5 of 11 uses) the word is used in connection with God or Jesus Christ. Practically it means to intentionally place the Lord in the utmost position in my soul. He is more important by far than any other person, thing, or thought. He is worthy of all praise and glory.

Why did Mary say that she magnifies the Lord with her soul instead of saying it was her mouth? The soul is the real part of us. It is the breath that God breathed into us and made us living. Therefore, it is the eternal part of us. But that is not all. The soul is that part of me that is able to have fellowship with God. Our soul is our character, what we really are. It is not visible but the expressions of it are. Therefore, others are able to tell quite easily if indeed we hold God as most valuable, most worthy of praise and exaltation.

Furthermore, the soul rejoices in the Savior. *And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior (v.47).* The term *spirit* is generally synonymous with soul. It even fits the idea of "breath" better. If my full being is exalting, raising God to the highest position in my opinion, I will rejoice. That rejoicing is never more obvious than when I think of Him being my Savior. True faith esteems the Lord most highly. Quasi-faith attaches God to a life of personal choices in which I esteem myself most highly and appeal to God to approve of my choices.

Second, faith acknowledges the Lord's mercy. Mary had to conclude, "I am blessed" *for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed (v.49).* This is Mary's assessment of her relationship with God in the past and the future. She was already acknowledging that

in the past, God has looked upon, gazed upon, considered deeply her humble condition. Mary's humble condition was that she was a nobody from nowhere. My humble condition is that I am by nature sunk in sin and in need of the Savior. In mercy, God provided the Savior for me just like He provided the Savior through Mary.

As a result of God's deep consideration of Mary's humble condition, future generations would exalt Mary. Indeed, they have. Even to the point of exalting her above Christ! But wait Mary! We have learned that future generations have accused you of being impregnated by a German soldier! Can Mary still say, "He has done mighty things for me"? Yes, according to verse forty-nine, *For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name (v.49)*. This is a past event. God had already determined great things for Mary based on the holy character of His name. Because He is holy He must act according to His plans. That includes saving you and me from our sins for His own glory.

Therefore, even when we, the redeemed people of God, are lied about, abused, maligned, and accused of wickedness because of God's work in us, we still exalt Him. We exalt Him because, even in spite of persecution, His mercy is abundant. *And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation (v.50)*. Here is God's plan for every generation—no exceptions—no changes.

It is good for us that God's plan involves God's mercy. His pity is directed to people who are pitiable, or we would use the word "pitiful." People who are born with the sin principle and cannot do right, but naturally desire to do wrong, are pitiful. And worse, the law of God is so plain, so clear that we cannot miss the reality that we who are born in sin are a continual offense, a stench to our holy Creator. And even worse is that because of our offenses, our Creator must condemn us for eternity. Yes, we are most to be pitied. But His mercy offers us forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Jesus born of Mary.

Third, faith anticipates the Lord's justice. Mary acknowledged that the Lord humbles the proud and mighty. *He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts (v.51). He has brought down the mighty from their thrones (v.52). And the rich he has sent empty away (v.53b)*. These are all past tense verbs but speak of God's work in the past. But they also refer

to future events that are so certain they can be described with past tense verbs.

Through Mary's baby, God changes everything in the world. One day every proud, mighty person made rich through their own schemes will stand before Christ's great throne of eternal judgment where they will be cast down to condemnation forever. But just as certainly, God carries out His justice as He cares for the needy. Just as God certainly will humble the proud, so will He *exalt those of humble estate (v.52b)*. *He has filled the hungry with good things (v.53a)*. In contrast to the mighty wicked, those who are humbled in Christ will be exalted for eternity.

Mary, being falsely accused by the religious leaders of her day as they accused Jesus of being the product of fornication (John 8:41), was thrust into a humble estate. Surely she felt very humbled when Jesus seemed to reject her (John 2:4; Matthew 12:48). And each of us is found in humble estate when we come to the realization that we are sinners who offend God our Creator all the time. That is the beauty of the law that humbles us.

These words sound so much like the words Jesus used in the Sermon on the Mount to describe people who are born again by God's mercy.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:3-12).

Fourth, faith is certain the Lord will keep His promises. *He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to*

our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever (vv.54-55). The Lord helps His people Israel by carrying out His promises to Abraham. God will keep His word forever. That He will remember His mercy to us also is our great hope.

Then there is the epilogue of this text. *And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home (v.56).* It appears that Mary stayed with Elizabeth until John was born and Zechariah began communicating again.

God did indeed show incredible mercy to Mary. She did believe God to the point of serving Him even when the cost was painful. She was sold out to God because she recognized His mercy toward her. Do we recognize that God is merciful to us? Do we trust Him to keep His promises? Do we serve, exalt, trust Him because He has already proven that He remembers?