

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." 46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

FIRST READING: Micah 5:2-5a

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But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. 3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. 4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; 5 and he shall be the one of peace.

This is the word of the Lord. THANKS BE TO GOD.

### ***“Mary, the Magnifier”***

Ah, Mary... otherwise known to us in our Christmas carols as “yon virgin”, “mother mild”, “meek & kind”, “gentle maiden”. And indeed, Mary of Nazareth was a peasant girl, a poor, vulnerable teen of about 13, a Jew of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, living under brutal Roman occupation when she was approached by an angel and given the news that she would bear the Son of the Most High God. However, she was also one who later spoke with thunder in her voice. When her kinswoman, Elizabeth, greeted her, Mary uttered or maybe sang some of the most powerful, revolutionary words in Scripture. The song is known as the Magnificat. because of the first words, *“My soul magnifies the Lord”*. We must consequently be cautious in judging Mary as only a gentle maiden. The Magnificat bears witness to this.

The Magnificat connects Mary to her past, to Hannah, Jael, Judith, to brave women of her Faith who were called blessed and who, too, were not passive vessels. In fact, much of Mary’s song was originally Hannah’s found in 1 Sam 2:1-10. They were ones through whom the Spirit worked to accomplish God’s purposes for the people Israel. They did not run from the task. They did not shrink from what God was calling them to do.

Just fyi, the Magnificat has been sung regularly by the Christian Church over the centuries. We, in fact, will sing a version of it today. It has been put to some of the most glorious music ever written...by Bach and Vivaldi, Rutter. Listen again...*My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant...The Mighty One has done great things for me. God has shown strength with his arm...scattered the proud, brought down the powerful from their thrones, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry, sent the rich away empty.*

Rev. Will Willimon comments, *“It was not a lullaby she sang...The little pregnant girl looked out across the Judean hills bathed in winter twilight and sang. She thought she heard kingdoms fall and the earth rock beneath her feet. She felt the child within her move and she hummed a little tune of liberation.”*<sup>1</sup> No, it was not a lullaby Mary sang. No, not a lullaby...not something we will find on a Hallmark Christmas card.

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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon. *“On a Wild & Windy Mountain”* (Nashville: Abingdon Press; 1984), 21.

It was a revolutionary song. It was a battle hymn, calling for the upset of the corrupt social structures and the elevation of the poor and weak. It was Mary's bold claim of God's power and righteousness in the face of a broken world. From somewhere deep inside her there was a compulsion to cry out, an impulse to say "No, No, No" to the forces which accepted the way things were. There was a need to proclaim that the God of Israel cared deeply and passionately about people like her, about how they lived and the conditions of their lives in the world. From her toes it bubbled up and erupted out her mouth. Her God, the Holy One of Israel, cared about those who were shut out and marginalized, who were hungry, who suffered under persecution and injustice, who lived each and every day in fear.

The Magnificat was also Mary's song of faith, solid faith in the divine promises made to save her people. God WAS bigger, she knew, than the evil in the world and God would redeem its brokenness and pain. And it was her promise to live her life magnifying this God. "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*" I like what Rev. MaryAnn McKibba Dana says... "A magnifying glass is, a tool which makes something bigger and more easily seen." "Magnifying God" she says, "is more than praising and worshipping, more than glorifying. It is witnessing to the nature of God with our lives, increasing the clarity, enlarging and bringing into focus the Almighty's character for all to see."<sup>2</sup>

You know, while we have the great advantage of living centuries following the resurrection of the Savior, the Savior whom Mary carried inside herself at the time that she sang the Magnificat, we still live in the "already but not yet." We know evil is doomed, but yet it still rears its ugly head. Our world still has corrupt systems of power which create poverty and all its sequelae. Still fear is used as a weapon and violence is in so many places the status quo. The reality of starvation and homelessness is as big as ever (what is it? 14 million people in Yemen on the verge of starving and 68 million people are refugees at present), and other realities are numbing: inequitable health care and education, the effect of racism and other 'isms, the

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<sup>2</sup> MaryAnn McKibben Dana. "*Gentle Mary, Meek and Mild?*" [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzVv\\_SAbFgc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzVv_SAbFgc) (accessed 12/21/18).

widening gap between the rich and poor, or the toll of centuries of poor care of planet. The list goes on and it can seem overwhelming.

*Many of you were able to get to meet our mission co-workers serving in Zambia, Charles and Melissa Johnson, during one of our mission month Sundays last summer when we teleconferenced with them. It was such a pleasure to hear of their work, although we didn't have to listen too hard to hear their frustration with some of the obstacles they faced. So, it was a particular delight for me to read their October newsletter and just hear the excitement coming through...to hear their Mary voices... "Chasefu Model Farm experienced a good maize harvest, despite hail damage. Over eighty 50 kg bags were harvested, providing an ample supply of food for the seminary students in the coming year, while also allowing some to be sold. Thanks to funds included in a grant awarded by a Presbyterian Church, an animal-drawn planter, several fertilizer applicators and a hand planter were purchased and will be available for use in the coming season. It is hoped this equipment will provide more consistency in planting and the proper application of fertilizer. Perhaps one day, funds will be available to purchase a tractor and other implements for the farm. Also, after a long wait, the completion of a Mother Care Shelter (where women come to wait before they deliver their babies) is nearing. We are rejoicing in this! And construction has begun too on the new agricultural storage facility at the Seminary. When completed, it will provide storage for tools and equipment, farm implements, and harvested crops. It will also generate revenue by providing storage to others for a fee. At the present time, 10,500 eight-inch concrete blocks are being molded by hand. And finally, the training of four women in a women's reproductive health program has been completed through a partnership with the Health Department, area churches, individuals and groups in the US. These four women will be the official spokesperson to help us educate school girls in our area. The culture surrounding women's issues is challenging, but little by little the stigma in Zambia is being reduced and girls are having a better, more healthy life.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/missionconnections/letter/seeds-of-promise/> (accessed 12-20-18)

Wow! They are doing wonderful things. And friends, we too have been called, like Mary, to magnify the Lord with our lives. We have been called to make God and God's purposes more easily visible through everything we do and say. We cannot run or shrink from the call for our work is still in great need, despite the temptation to do so. We need say as loud a "No" to the temptation to look the other way, to think it's none of our business, to give up because it's so overwhelming, or to think what we do won't make a difference. We need to say as loud "No" to this as we say "No, No, No" to the brokenness of the Righteous One's created design.

We may not be able to magnify the Lord in as large and direct way as Charles & Melissa are, although I'm glad we are assisting them financially, but, friends, we too CAN do it in just as important ways in our everyday lives, like, for instance, baking a dish for a grieving family following a funeral, or paying for the guy's order behind us at Starbucks, or making a "to go" meal for a confused man in our parking lot, or praying with a visitor who has been admitted to the hospital, or collecting blankets and biscuits for dogs and cats at the animal shelters, or just offering a smile to a frazzled cashier during this busy season, or inviting a lonely one to the Christmas Eve service. These things too magnify the Lord.

A last thought...*When our boys were young, they took a magnifying glass outside in the Texas sun and let its rays shine through it. They focused the energy of the light onto a piece of dry kindling and they carefully blew on it... and well, you know what happened? Ah, yes, first a bit of smoke and then...and then a fire.* Friends, the Divine Power who created that Texas Sun has come to be with us and for us. He came as a baby, born to a vulnerable, young, poor, girl, to a young woman who had the courage and the faith to look around at her broken, broken world, and to emphatically insist that it should not be so. And then she then let herself be used as a magnifying glass so that the Light of the World could catch it on fire! And now, we, you and I, are called to further increase those flames. It is a mighty task but with the Spirit's wind a blowin, we can. Let's go. *For our souls too yearn to magnify the Lord. Our spirits rejoice in God our Savior too. For indeed, the Mighty One has done great things for us and holy is his name.* Merry Christmas, brothers and sisters, Merry Christmas. Amen.