

Sermon preached at OCC, 22 December 2024

Lord God, may your word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:46-55

Magnifying God

*To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour...*

These lines from William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence* – invite us to see the infinite in the small and the eternal in the moment. Blake magnifies seemingly simple objects to reveal God's glory. Today, we explore how Mary's song of praise, the Magnificat,¹ teaches us to magnify God and discover God's purposes in our lives.

When we hear the word 'magnify,' we might think of a magnifying glass – a tool that makes things appear large. In a modern sense, to magnify is 'to increase the apparent size of an object.'² Yet, in scripture, 'magnify' means something more profound. The original sense of 'magnify' was 'to praise highly, to glorify, to extol,' specifically, 'to praise or render honour to God.'³ This older sense of magnifying emphasizes not appearances but recognizing and elevating God's greatness in our lives. Mary's Magnificat beautifully exemplifies this.

Mary's song begins, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour"⁴. At first glance, it seems Mary is celebrating her blessings. After all, God chose her, a humble peasant girl, to bear the Messiah. But consider her reality: she is a peasant girl from a small village. Her friends and neighbours could see her as a disgrace if Joseph didn't marry her later.⁵ In addition, she will soon learn from Simeon being the mother of the Messiah doesn't seem full of blessings, either. She will bear the unspeakable grief of watching as her son is rejected, shamed, and crucified: "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel ...

¹ In Latin, [my soul] magnifies [the Lord]

² Oxford English dictionary

³ Bible study tools

⁴ Luke 1:46-47

⁵ Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:19

and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”⁶ She will witness her son’s rejection and crucifixion.

Despite these challenges, Mary praises God. Why? Because she sees God’s actions in her life as part of God’s greater redemptive work. How could she know such a thing as she was a mere peasant girl? But when we think about all the great forefathers in Israel’s history, we learn that the beginning of these significant figures was tiny and insignificant. Still, the end was great – like Moses, for example. When Mary accepts that things will happen according to God, she perceives that her life is purposeful in God’s plan, although she may not understand it fully. God’s ways radically differ from human ways. As the story unfolds, she understands it better through the annunciation, the praise of her cousin Elizabeth for her, and later the prophecy of Simeon. In doing so, she begins to see the work of God, her son, in the world. How did Mary magnify God? Her Song of Praise has got the clues.

The Magnificat reveals God’s transformative work. The God she praises is not content with only pointing to heaven; God’s redemptive work begins here on earth. God fills the hungry not only with hope but with food. Rather than being satisfied with comforting the lowly, Mary’s Lord lifts them, granting them dignity and honour, a seat at the table and a voice in the community. She also declares God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich God sent away empty.⁷ That is, God’s salvation is not just spiritual but tangible, addressing physical and social needs. God also disrupts the world’s power structures, not through violence but through love. Jesus’ ministry embodies this, healing wounds and restoring broken relationships.⁸ As such, Mary’s song is not just personal but also prophetic. It celebrates how God’s work in her life reflects God’s work in the world.

If so, what does it mean for us to magnify God today? It means seeing God’s hand in our lives and responding with praise, even in uncertainty. Let’s think about a few examples. Although not included, the beginning of the passage is about Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, her cousin. Elizabeth was barren for many years, and now she got pregnant. Elizabeth’s story reminds us that God can transform disgrace into joy and use our lives for God’s purposes. From Israel’s point of view, the coming son of Elizabeth and Zachariah will be John the Baptist, who will proclaim the baptism of repentance by criticizing the spiritual death of Israel. As John will

⁶ Luke 2:34-35

⁷ Luke 1:53

⁸ Micah 5:2-5a

be the herald of the Messiah, Elizabeth's pregnancy was the beginning of God's fulfilling promises and reversing the social order that Jesus would complete.

The Magnificat continues to show God's transformative power by disrupting the world's power structures, dethroning rulers, and humbling the mighty through love. In the movie *City of Joy*, an American doctor, a British nurse, and an illiterate Indian farmer unite to transform a Calcutta⁹ ghetto. Like Mary and Elizabeth, they overcome fear and self-doubt, trusting in a greater purpose. The movie doesn't appear to have any Christian theme, but their journey mirrors those of the biblical forefathers, how God's love can disarm power and heal communities.

In our story time, we had a memory game. For most of us, the time was too short to remember everything. If someone says that it will be necessary to memorize everything in the story, such as a live-or-die situation, we may have done much better than the first time. In the story, Fred could magnify God by participating in the 1st Advent in his dream. In the end, he could understand it better as he learned it from the 1st hand. Magnifying God is unpacking what God has done to us in our lives. It allows us to reflect on God's work in our lives. We also learn when we choose to trust God's plan, even though life is unclear, we praise God's work in hope. Finally, we can magnify God by embodying God's love. It helps us reflect God's character in the world and see the same image of God in others, too. As if the annunciation has transformed Mary forever, as if Fred could magnify the simple story by celebrating Jesus' birth physically, we need to magnify things in depth by sharing our stories of how we discover God's work in our lives and how it has transformed us entirely. This week, let us take time to magnify God in our own lives. Let us celebrate God's faithfulness and respond with thanks and praise. Amen.

⁹ It was renamed as Kolkata in 2001 CE.