

**My Soul Magnifies: Luke 1:39-56**

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1,600 words/11 minutes including Prayer for Illumination

Won't you pray with me? Loving and gracious God, may we hear Your message today and every day. May your Spirit teach us in patience to see the signs of Your divinity everywhere. May we keep Mary, Mother of God, close to our hearts this Advent and onward. Amen.

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"My soul magnifies." These are the first three words of the Magnificat, the passage from today's New Testament reading, starting at the forty-sixth verse. And, I'm really fascinated by this word, "magnifies." Our translation today comes from the New Revised Standard Version (Updated Edition). Not all translations include the verb "to magnify." For instance, the New International Version states, "My soul glorifies." The Inclusive Bible, an egalitarian and gender-inclusive translation, reads, "My soul proclaims your greatness, O God." The King James Version, the oldest of these, does indeed mirror the NRSV: "And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord." These translations make meaning out of the Greek verb *megaluno*, or "to make or declare great." It comes from the word *megas*. In the New Testament, we see this verb in contexts of exaltation, greatness, and high esteem. So, let's think about what Mary may mean here: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." We could go the route of the NIV and the Inclusive Bible, arguing that Mary in this moment and for the rest of her life will proclaim the good news and glory of the Lord. However, maybe we could read this translation a bit differently if we consider another possible interpretation of *megaluno*: "to make great."

The late, ex-evangelical author Rachel Held Evans wrote a considerable amount on Mary. In her New York Times' bestseller from 2012, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, she conducted an experiment inspired by the lives of women described in Scripture. Evans devoted a year of her life following the gendered rules and expectations of ancient women (definitely easier said than done). From Tamar to Martha, she reflects on the stories of biblical women and their place in our lives today. She writes of Mary,

Much could be said...about the 'real Mary' of the biblical narrative: the teenage girl from Nazareth who gave birth on a dirty stable floor; the terrified mom who scurried frantically through the streets of Jerusalem, looking for her lost little boy; the woman who had enough influence over Jesus to convince him to liven up a wedding with his first miracle of turning water into wine; the grieved mother who wept in the shadow of the cross. But perhaps the most revealing glimpse into Mary's true character can be found in the Magnificat—a prayer beloved by saints and Southern Baptists alike. (187)

Evans considers the Magnificat to be one of the truest instantiations of Mary as Theotokos—the Mother of God. Mary is the mother of God eternal and God incarnate. Evans writes, “She is what made Jesus both fully God and fully man, her womb the place where heaven and earth meld into one” (193). Not only in her words does she declare God great, but she, in her body, *makes* God—nourishing and protecting and birthing into the world this greatness.

It shouldn't come as a total shock to you that we're revising the Magnificat and discussing Mother Mary on the eve of Women's Advent Gathering (tomorrow from 7pm to 9pm). The God that Mary describes—the God she carries—is really righteous and radical and reflects the strength that the prophets wrote of in the Hebrew Bible. Mary's child will elevate the lowly, extend his mercy, scatter the proud, dethrone the powerful, and fill the hungry. In this Advent season, we wait for someone who will fulfill God's promises and come to the aid of God's children. I think there's sometimes a misconception of Mary as only a passive representation of womanhood. She, the stainless, virtuous virgin who stands in stark contrast to Eve, villainous, deceitful temptress, or the other Mary of Bethany (often conflated with Mary Magdalene), the “sinful woman” who anointed Jesus' feet. As we know, these dichotomies of womanhood, gender, and sexuality are false and not especially useful. They're incredibly limiting to ourselves as people today and to these figures who belong in the holy pages of God's text. All three of these women, and the dozens of others in Scripture, speak to the sides of humanity that we all experience in relationship to the divine. And, Mother Mary is a powerful figure in her own right. She believes deeply in the works of God and Jesus' forthcoming justice. She holds the beliefs that our world will be upended in service of the poor, the lowly, and the humble. If we compare Mary's reaction to Zechariah's when the angel Gabriel visits her earlier in Luke and announces her pregnancy, she is confused and ponders what Gabriel might mean. But, she is not afraid. She is not disbelieving. Instead, she opens her heart and mind to the words of God's messenger and says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Through her courageous trust in God, she enthusiastically agrees to deliver a new world into existence.

There's a really amazing image of Mary that I want you to look up after today's service. It's actually a life-sized statue of Mary from 2000 in Ely Cathedral, a church located in a small village outside of Cambridge, England and dates back to the 7th century CE. David Wynne's representation of Mary is unlike any art I've seen of her. I want us to picture this together. Mary is wearing her traditional blue garment. She is visibly pregnant, and a golden sash accents her waist. She is barefoot with feet planted firmly on the ground. Her back is straight and strong. Her long hair is flowing behind her. And—are you ready for the most striking thing?—she has her

hands lifted high above her head, her palms turned inward, proclaiming to and blessing the world. I didn't include the image in the slide deck, because I want you to really imagine this type of Mary for yourself. Is she different than you expected? Does *this* visualization actually seem more real to you and what you know of those closest to Jesus? Several people who have seen the statue in person and written about it do in fact identify Wynne's Mary as the Mary we know from the Magnificat.

Clearly, we aren't the only ones who find magnificence in Mary's strength of body, soul, and conviction at only the age of thirteen or fourteen—in her long travels, backaches, and sleepless nights as the promise of hope grew inside of her...in her power as a parent and caretaker...in her legacy as a pillar of community and creation. In the mid-1970s, the country of Argentina was in the midst of a brutal and repressive dictatorship. The military had taken over the government and attempted to install a fascist, nominally "Christian" dogma. Leaders within the dictatorship—including some local priests and bishops—wielded Scripture as a weapon to justify their violence and restrictions on intellectual and religious expressions. The military dictatorship, also known as the *guerra sucia*, is perhaps most known for their abductions and disappearances of over thirty-thousand Argentines. Some of these victims include babies who were born in captivity and never released to their families. A group of mothers risked their lives and wellbeing by protesting the government's abduction of their loved ones. This group is still in existence today and performs weekly demonstrations near the government center in Buenos Aires. Their name is *las madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, or the mothers of the May Plaza. Demonstrators created posters with messages like, "Where are our children? Where are the hundreds of babies born in captivity? 30,000 detained and disappeared." For a time, mothers within this group called out the hypocrisy of the dictatorship through Scripture. Yes, they wrote out verses from the Magnificat on their posters, so the military and government could see Mary everywhere. Of course, the dictatorship quickly banned the use of the Magnificat. They actually banned God's word for their own political agenda, silencing powerful and fearless mothers by eliminating access to the words of Mary.

"My soul magnifies." Mary's words magnify the glory of God and the goodness of Christ. She brings into existence revolution, radical hospitality, and deep, abiding love. Not only does she create it through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, but she is deeply and intrinsically part of Christ's movement and establishes a ministry of her own. As we enter this new week, I invite us to think about the Marys in our lives: Who has nourished us? Blessed us? Strengthened us? How can we, in turn, use our gifts and talents to exalt the low in spirit, the humble, and the

poor? How can we expand our souls in deep love and radical trust to listen, wait, hope, and believe?

I invite us, also, to imagine the Marys we have seen today: the pregnant fourteen-year-old, the proclaimer of the Magnificat, the warrior of God with her arms outstretched, and the steadfast defender. Which Mary are we called to? Which feels closest to our hearts?

I'll leave you now with a piece of poem called "Sometimes I Wonder" by Pastor Kaitlin Shelter:

...I think of feeding Jesus  
birthing Jesus,  
the expulsion of blood  
and smell of sweat,  
the salt of a mother's tears  
onto the soft head of the Salt of the Earth,  
feeling lonely  
and tired  
hungry  
overwhelmed  
loving

Friends, may our souls magnify and be magnified now and always. Amen.