

The Beauty of Christmas

My Soul Magnifies the Lord

Luke 1:39-56

Mark Vroegop

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, 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? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home (Luke 1:39-56, ESV).

Last week I invited you to think about Christmas traditions with me. We talked about the foods, activities, and experiences that are important this time of year. Part of the reason that traditions are valuable is because they serve to ground us in something consistent and historical.

We need this because of the pace of change that is happening all around us. These traditions provide a level of emotional stability. Sometimes we don't even know how vital these things are until they are removed.

When I think back on the pandemic and not meeting together, I remember the tears in people's eyes when they came into the sanctuary after being away for months. I also will never forget the sound of a sanctuary full of people singing together. Another tradition that began at my previous church in Holland, and I brought to College Park in 2008, is our 24-hour prayer time over New Year's Eve. Every year we have people read the Scripture in the sanctuary and pray in 30-minute time blocks. It's one of my favorite events of the year.

Traditions are usually connected to joy, aren't they? While you may remember something bad that happened or seems to happen every year, that's not a tradition—that's dysfunction!

Joy and tradition are linked together.

During Advent, we are examining some of the traditional texts connected to the birth of Jesus Christ. Last week we looked at Luke 1:26-38, the meeting of Gabriel and Mary where the virgin birth was announced.

This Sunday we will study what is often called the Magnificat, Mary's joyful prayer of thanksgiving. And I'd like to use this traditional prayer to see what lessons we might be able to learn about joy, gratitude, and worship.

I suspect that there are some of us who might need a joy reset or a perspective change as we approach the Christmas season. There may be others who are going to need an attitude adjustment in a few days or weeks. Perhaps there are some who are finding this Christmas season to be uniquely painful, and this passage might help to give you a new perspective.

Our text has two joyful statements. One is from Elizabeth and the other is from Mary. Let's look at each of them and then draw out some conclusions and applications.

Elizabeth's Joy (vv. 39-45)

After Mary's affirmation—"let it be to me according to your word"—she responds in faith by traveling to see Elizabeth. Remember that Gabriel had not only announced to Mary that Elizabeth was miraculously pregnant, but also that this was a sign to Mary about God's ability to do the impossible.

Luke describes Mary's decision with the words "went with haste." Interestingly, he uses the same phrase to describe the shepherds' response after the departure of the heavenly host in Luke 2:16. There's a sense of urgency and anticipation.

Mary travels about three days from Nazareth to a town near the city of Jerusalem. The Holy City is located between a series of hills that surround it, and Zachariah and Elizabeth live in this region.

Once she arrives, Luke features the greeting between Mary and Elizabeth. Here's what the text says:

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit . . . (Luke 1:41).

There are several things happening here:

- This is the first meeting (albeit in utero) of John the Baptist and Jesus the Messiah.
- John, as a six-month-in-gestation baby, leaps with excitement in the womb, a symbol of joy over the fulfillment of God's promises.
- Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit along with John (see 1:15), and this will empower her joyful proclamation.

In verse 42, Elizabeth speaks—actually shouts! Luke wants this to be clear. That's why he says "exclaimed with a loud cry." Often this kind of language in the Bible indicates an inspired statement (see

Mark 9:24; John 1:15, 7:28).¹ James Edwards, in his commentary, points out that this is remarkably different than the Elizabeth who was marked by disgrace and who remained hidden (1:24).²

Her proclamation is a focused celebration of what God has done through Mary:

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? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Luke 1:42-45).

Elizabeth recognizes the significance of this moment, blessing both Mary and the child that she will bear. However, Elizabeth is saying that God is at work. She’s recognizing the grace of God that’s being revealed in this moment. She is stunned that God would allow her to have this encounter knowing that the baby in Mary’s womb will be her “Lord.”

What’s more, she reiterates to Mary what happened earlier, that her baby leaped for joy in her womb at the sound of her voice. This is important enough for Luke to record it in his narration and then include it again in Elizabeth’s statement. The coming Messiah creates joy in the hearts of those who know what is happening.

Elizabeth’s proclamation concludes with a blessing about belief. She celebrates the divinely given faith that Mary has regarding the promise of the Lord to her. Elizabeth believes. Mary believes. And this proclamation celebrates not merely the presence of faith, but that the fulfillment of God’s promises is happening in their lifetime.

It’s interesting that Zachariah isn’t mentioned as being present. The opening miraculous narrative involves the Holy Spirit empowering an elderly woman and young girl. Bold proclamation and divine deliverance will come from these two women, not powerful kings or priests. Elizabeth speaks for both of them about the amazing seat that both of them have in beholding the works of the Lord.

Elizabeth speaks with joy at the coming of the Christ child.

Mary’s Joy (vv. 46-56)

We now turn our attention to the most famous song of praise in the New Testament. You may know it as the Magnificat. That’s because the Latin translation of verse 46 is “Magnificat anima mea Dominum.” It’s a stunning hymn of praise that captures the heart of Mary as she reflects on God’s grace to her and the coming deliverance.

¹ Robert H. Stein, [Luke](#), vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 90.

² James R. Edwards, [The Gospel according to Luke](#), ed. D. A. Carson, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2015), 53.

I mentioned this last week, but it's fascinating and instructive to see the parallels between this hymn of praise and Hannah's hymn of praise in 1 Samuel. The story of Samuel, Saul, and David begins with these words:

And Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the LORD; my horn is exalted in the LORD. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation. There is none holy like the LORD: for there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God." (1 Sam. 2:1-2).

Just a reminder that we'll start our new series on January 21, and we'll have a reading challenge for you in the beginning of the year. But you could even start now if you wanted to get a head start (yourchurch.com/readingplan).

We're not entirely sure when Mary wrote this hymn of praise. Some commentators wonder if it was composed as she traveled to visit with Elizabeth and reflected on the recent events of her life. Like other hymns in the Bible or psalms of praise, it's designed to be offered by anyone whose heart is full of gratitude to God and who is amazed at God's deliverance.

It's noteworthy that the focus of the Magnificat is God. James Edwards, in his commentary, explains that every verb points to God except verses 47 and 48.³ The focus is on God's power, his holiness, and his mercy.⁴ And there's a particular message about the way that God works. See if you can pick up on it.

The Magnificat begins with a parallel statement of praise in vss. 46-47:

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47).

The point here is that adoration and worship are springing from the depth of Mary's being. The use of both soul and spirit are meant to connect us to a deep, internal reflection of praise. Mary's joy is coming from the core of who she is: "my soul magnifies . . . my spirit rejoices. . . ."

In verses 48-49 Mary specifically lists the reasons for her praise. Look for the three "for's" here. First, God has looked upon her humble estate. Take note that Mary sees herself as weak and vulnerable. She's not famous, powerful, strong, or influential. This is a common theme throughout the Bible, but also in 1 Samuel. Actually, it's a central theme in that book as well.

The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength (1 Sam. 2:4).

³ James R. Edwards, [*The Gospel According to Luke*](#), ed. D. A. Carson, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2015), 54.

⁴ Leon Morris, [*Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 3, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 93.

Secondly, Mary praises God for the undeserved blessing that is upon her life. And third she magnifies the Lord because he has done great things for her. This isn't an expression of self-concern. It's an acknowledgment of the grace she's received that makes her in awe of God: "holy is his name."

The rest of the Magnificat turns its focus specifically to what God is like and what makes him worthy of praise. There's a pattern here in these verses. I'll give you a hint. It's not the powerful who are blessed by God

- v. 50 - God extends mercy to those who fear him, and he does this generation after generation. God is faithful to those who trust him.
- v. 51 – the proud in their hearts are scattered while God demonstrates strength.
- v. 52 – the mighty are taken down while the humble are exalted.
- v. 53 – the rich go home empty, but God fills the needy with good things.
- V. 54 – God has helped Israel, and he keeps his promises – the covenant that began with Abraham.

Do you see the themes and how they relate to the contrast between human need and God's help? The Magnificat cuts cross-grain against how the world works and the assumptions of human beings.

Commentator James Edwards calls this a "revolutionary blueprint of divine favor."⁵

It is a hymn not of the proud, but of the powerless; not of just deserts, but of unexpected grace; not of a world fully controlled and determined by human powers, but overturned by divine comedy. God is the subject of nearly every verb, and the verbs are all transitive: they do not declare who God is, but what God *does* as the powerful deliverer of the needy and oppressed...The Almighty restructures cosmic reality through the unmighty. The God of the Magnificat advocates for the small, insignificant, and needy.⁶

In this way, Mary's joy becomes the same kind of joy that we can experience and embrace today. The Magnificat becomes a model for God-centered joy.

Applications

Allow me to reflect with you on three ways that we might glean truths from this traditional Christmas text.

1. **True joy is grounded in God-centeredness.** This text reminds us that true joy emanates from our understanding of who God is.

⁵ James R. Edwards, [*The Gospel According to Luke*](#), ed. D. A. Carson, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2015), 56.

⁶Ibid, 56.

2. **Surprising deliverance is how God often works.** The Advent narrative is truly a revolutionary blueprint of divine favor. God works in ways that seem counter intuitive.
3. **Never without hope.** An old woman and a young virgin show us that God keeps his promise. Even when it seems dark and the night feels long, when God's involved, there's always hope.

This traditional prayer helps us learn lessons about joy, gratitude, and worship.

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