

LUKE 1:39–55. (EHV)

In those days Mary got up and hurried to the hill country, to a town of Judah. She entered the home of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. Just as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She called out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me? In fact, just now, as soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy! Blessed is she who believed, because the promises spoken to her from the Lord will be fulfilled!" Then Mary said,

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior,
because he has looked with favor on the humble state of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed,
because the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm.
He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones.
He has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent
away empty.
He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever.

What's your favorite Christmas hymn? Do you like to sing with the angels using Martin Luther's words in "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come," or using Charles Wesley's words in "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"? Do you like to shout for joy with the psalmist using the words of Isaac Watts in "Joy to the World"? Do you like to reflect with the apostle John on who the baby lying in the manger really is by singing the words of William Dix in "What Child Is This," or the words of Germanus in "A Great and Mighty Wonder," or the words of Prudentius in "Of the Father's Love Begotten"?

One of the greatest Christmas hymns was composed by a woman, and we don't usually think of it as a Christmas hymn. When you first hear her hymn, you might think that the woman is telling her own story. But as you listen further, you discover she is telling the story of the Lord's mercy in sending the Messiah. Study it more deeply, and you discover that she is singing your story and mine, the story of every single Christian. I am talking about Mary's song, which is traditionally called the *Magnificat*, because in Latin it begins, "My soul *magnifies* the Lord."

This morning, let's walk through Mary's song and magnify the Lord with Mary.

Mary had responded well to the angel Gabriel's announcement that she would conceive and give birth to the Messiah by a supernatural act of God. "I am the Lord's servant," she had said. "May it happen to me as you have said." But God knew that the coming months and years were going to be difficult for her and that she was going to face suspicions and accusations and

trouble and ridicule. And so he had Gabriel give her a pretty strong hint about where she might find strength to prepare herself for what was to come. “Listen, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age even though she was called barren,” he had told her, “and this is her sixth month. For nothing will be impossible for God.”

Mary got the hint and quickly made up her mind to go and pay her relative Elizabeth a visit. She went south from Nazareth in Galilee to a town in the hill country of Judea where John and Elizabeth lived. When she arrived, she entered their home and greeted Elizabeth. Luke doesn't tell us what words Mary used to greet Elizabeth, but he does tell us that two things happened when she spoke her greeting. First, the child with whom Elizabeth was six-months pregnant, namely John the Baptist, jumped in Elizabeth's womb, and second, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit in order to understand why Mary was visiting and why her infant had jumped in her womb. She was very excited and exclaimed to Mary:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

These words have since been turned into part of the *Ave Maria* or Hail Mary prayer. If the Hail Mary simply stuck with Scripture, it would be fine. But when it goes on to say, “Holy Mary, pray for us now and at the hour of our death,” it goes far beyond Scripture, as we will see in Mary's own song.

Nevertheless, Elizabeth does speak very highly of Mary and even calls her “the mother of my Lord,” which we have no reason to understand as anything other than what it sounds like: It sounds like Elizabeth is clearly acknowledging that Mary is going to give birth to God. And Elizabeth also calls Mary blessed for her faith, for believing that the words promises to her from the Lord would be fulfilled.

Now put yourself in Mary's shoes or sandals. Your relative who is considerably older than you—perhaps an aunt or even a grandmother on your mother's side—is speaking highly of you up and down. “Blessed are you among women! Blessed is the child you will bear! Yes, you are going to bear my Lord himself! My child jumped in my womb just from hearing your voice! And blessed are you for believing an unbelievable message from the Lord!” Essentially, “Mary, you are incredibly blessed, girl!”

How would you respond? Snap your fingers and do a little dance or shimmy in the living room? Wave your hand at her and pretend to dismiss her words, while smiling and secretly swelling with pride? Smile bashfully and say, “Aw, that's sweet of you to say, thank you”?

Mary responds by showing just how blessed, how favored and gifted by God, she really is. She takes all of Elizabeth's kind words as ultimately pointing to God, not her, and she speaks or sings a song of praise to God. Some have divided her words up into two sections or stanzas. In the first section, she talks about the Lord's special favor to her. In the second, she talks about how the Lord's special favor to her relates to his traits in general and what he is going to do through the Child to whom she will give birth.

She begins: “My soul magnifies *or* proclaims the greatness of the Lord.” Everything you're saying to me, Elizabeth, just makes me think more and more highly of God.

“And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.” This sounds the death knell to any thought of Mary as holy or deserving of the privilege she received. She cannot call God her Savior unless she thinks of herself as in need of saving and rescue. She is acknowledging that

when her ancestor David said, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me,” that is true of her too.

To confirm that that’s what she means, we only need to keep reading: “My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior, because he has looked with favor on the humble state of his servant.” Mary isn’t just talking about her poor peasant background; she was in fact descended from royalty. Mary’s Son would later tell about how a man went home justified before God because he humbled himself—that is, he did not try to hold his good works before God as worthy of his blessing, but he beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me a sinner.” James and Peter also tell us to humble ourselves before God by confessing our sin to him (James 4:9–10; 1 Peter 5:5–6). Mary is praising God for blessing her in spite of her humble and lowly condition.

In fact, God has blessed her so tremendously that “from now on all generations will call me blessed, because the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” We tend to shy away from calling Mary “the blessed virgin,” because we think that sounds too Roman Catholic. But Mary herself anticipated that all generations would call her blessed, not because she was so spectacular and praiseworthy, but because the Mighty One had done great things for her, and because *his* name—not hers—is holy. God alone is perfect, and he alone does things that no one else would think to do, that no one else could do, for our benefit. And just as God had shown mercy to her in her generation, so he would continue to show mercy in every generation to those who fear him, and that mercy would cause others also to say, “Wow, how blessed was Mary, that she received the undeserved privilege of giving birth to God’s own Son in human flesh, the Savior of the world!”

Now Mary goes on to talk about the Lord’s general traits. “He has shown strength with his arm.” Dividing a sea was not too much for him. Giving the Israelites victory against overwhelming odds was not too much for him. Preserving a man alive inside the belly of a fish was not too much for him. Healing diseases and raising from the dead, even back in the Old Testament, was not too much for him. And causing a virgin to become pregnant is also nothing for him.

His strength also includes what follows: “He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their hearts.” Those who think their own reasoning can sit in judgment on God’s word and decide whether this or that is true or false get scattered a thousand different directions. “What *really* happened at the Red Sea?” A thousand different opinions—none of them true, except the one that isn’t an opinion, but simply an acknowledgement of what God clearly says in his Word. “How was Jesus *really* conceived and born?” A thousand different opinions—none of them true, except the one that isn’t an opinion, but simply takes God at his word. The foolishness of man is wiser than man’s wisdom and the weakness of man is stronger than man’s strength.

“He has brought down rulers from their thrones. He has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent away empty.” God has demonstrated his ability to do this in the physical realm, but he has done it there to illustrate what he does in the spiritual realm. In the physical realm, think of how he brought down proud King Saul and gave his throne to David’s family—David, who was the youngest in his family and the prophet Samuel’s last choice to be king. Think of how he brought down wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, how he made sure that one of Queen Athaliah’s grandsons was rescued when she tried to

put all of them to death, and how he later brought her down and put her seven-year-old grandson on the throne in her place. Which human could do any of these things with the snap of his fingers like God can and does?

But God especially humbles those who try to sit enthroned over him, whether they are actual kings or queens or not, who try to rule over him in their thoughts. He especially sends away empty those who think they are rich without God and do not need a thing from him, whether they actually have a lot of money or not. And he lifts up those who are lowly, that is, who recognize their sin. He fills the hungry with good things, that is, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and salvation.

And God would especially do all of this through his Son Jesus, the one to whom Mary would give birth. Mary concludes: “He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever.” Mary is referring to the promise God made to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob, that through their offspring all nations on earth would be blessed. So Mary is already hinting at what Jesus and his apostle Paul would both later explain clearly—Abraham’s descendants are not really the Jewish people, but they are all from every nation who share Abraham’s faith in God’s promises.

And right there, when we realize that Mary is not just talking about herself, not just talking about her people the Israelites, but is also talking about us—that leads us to go back and sing the song again with a fresh perspective and to realize that Mary isn’t really just singing about herself or about her Son. She’s also singing about us, singing for us. Listen to the song again, and ask yourself which part you could not sing yourself:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior,
because he has looked with favor on the humble state of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed”—

That is the one line that really uniquely identifies this song as Mary’s, since none of us will ever have the universal recognition among Christians that Mary has. But it is still true of us in a general way, when we remember the words of Revelation: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” In a general way, all generations of Christians call everyone who has died in the Lord blessed, because of the grace God has shown them through Mary’s Son. Mary continues:

“because the Mighty One has done great things for me”—think of your baptism, the sins he has daily forgiven you, and the times he has spared you from danger, disease, or disaster, or helped you to bear them and get through them—

“and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm.
He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones.
He has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent away empty.

He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever.”

It’s all there. Everything that describes how God’s grace came to you. Everything that describes your current relationship with God. Everything that you can pass on to the next generation about God.

This is the final Sunday before Christmas. I pray this song has helped you to remember that Christmas is not just a time to sing with the angels and to shout for joy with the psalmist and to reflect with the apostle John. Christmas is also a time to magnify the Lord with Mary. It’s a time to remember that whenever anyone points out our blessings and gifts, that’s not an occasion to magnify ourselves. Everything we are and have is due to how great the Lord is, not to how great we are. So with Mary let us magnify the Lord for what he has done for us individually, and magnify him from what he continues to do for those who fear him in every generation—all and only for the sake of his Son, who is also Mary’s Son, Jesus our Savior. Amen.