

Mary's Song: The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55)

Many of you have probably heard me say that I have no musical talent. That might not be entirely true. I can carry a tune and keep a rhythm. But I can't play any instruments. On my first Wednesday night here, Allen asked if I played the guitar, I assume because I'm a student pastor and have a beard, but I do not. I tried learning for a bit in high school, but when a string broke and hit me in the face, I decided it wasn't for me. I can sing decently well, but I don't like to hear myself. Some of you think that the music in church should be quiet enough that you can hear yourselves sing. I'm on the other side, saying, "Crank it up, because the last thing I want is to hear myself." Some of that, I believe, is because, while I can carry a decent tune, I married a woman with the voice of an angel. She asks why I don't sing in front of her and I say, "For the same reason I wouldn't play HORSE with Michael Jordan. It would be embarrassing by comparison. I can play basketball, but he's Michael Jordan!" So now I have an inferiority complex and I don't want to be heard.

This morning, we're going to continue moving toward Christmas by examining a song that generations have heard. The formal name for this song is the Magnificat, Latin for "magnify." It's a song of praise and that's what I want us to do this morning: As we examine this text, let's join in praising God together.

This is the song Mary sang in praise after she visited her cousin Elizabeth to tell her about the news she had received from the angel. If you remember, as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's voice, her unborn son, John the Baptist, leapt in her womb and Elizabeth affirmed the good news Mary was bringing to her. If you're like me, you sometimes skip over little songs like this in books. I love to read, and I was just telling Amanda a couple of nights ago that, for some reason, if something like a song is set off in block text when I'm reading, my brain automatically wants to skip it. "Well, that's not important. Let's get back to the story." But this

morning, we want to slow down and see what Mary's song reveals to us about the advent, the arrival, of Christ.

If you're taking notes this morning, and I hope you are because I held up Ginger's printing process this week to put a note-taking sheet in your worship guide, our main idea is this: **The advent of Christ reveals the true nature of blessing, the true nature of God, and the true nature of history, and this should move us to magnify our King.**

Let's read the entire text together, then we'll come back and look more closely at each of these parts.

*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."*

Our first point this morning is this:

I. The Blessing of God is His Presence

Read with me again:

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.

Mary's song begins with heavy praise. "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." We'll come back to this later and look at it in more detail, but first, we want to look at why Mary feels this way. Why is she praising God in this moment? Most of us, after receiving the news Mary just got, would be confused and panicked to say the least! Not Mary, though. "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.” Mary rejoices and praises God because, she says, she is blessed and God has done great things for her.

Mary’s song reveals the true nature of blessing. We tend to think of blessings in material or measurable terms. Someone once said, “More money, more problems,” but many of us tend to think, “More money, more blessing.” More possessions equals greater blessing. A new job equals greater blessing. If we’re in good health, we’re blessed. If not, well, not so much. Last month was November, the month that we find ourselves obligated to be thankful for things and tell social media about it, and I saw several posts that demonstrated thankfulness by, essentially, finding the silver lining in negative situations. Something like this: “Gotta spend all day sweeping and mopping. Well, I’m blessed because I have a house to live in. Gotta get up and go to work on Monday. I’m blessed with a paying job. One kid needs a bath because she rubbed mashed banana all through her hair and the other kid needs a straitjacket or an exorcism, can’t tell which yet. That means I’m blessed with two kids.” You get the idea. Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying this is a bad exercise. In fact, I think it’s a great one. I think practicing gratitude and thankfulness, even in difficult circumstances, is something we should do daily. The problem, though, is that we’ve been trained to keep our definition of blessing too small. Our gaze is too low. Mary keeps her gaze high.

Mary told us herself that her estate was humble. She was young and unmarried and nothing in Scripture indicates that she was wealthy or affluent. And, the key point here, *nothing about her material or financial status has changed because of the angel’s announcement.* If anything, given that Mary was an unwed virgin who became pregnant, her material status became more difficult. So why did she call herself blessed? Because “He who is mighty has done great things for me.” What great thing did God do? He gave her, and through her, the world, the gift of His presence. Last week, if you remember, we said that God had not dwelled with Israel for centuries, but then His presence returned in the form of

Immanuel, the Christ, God with us. Mary recognized this and understood that the truest blessing a person can have, far beyond material things or health or status, is God Himself. But we have been trained to think of blessings almost solely as those temporal things.

This is why I say that our gaze is too low. Anyone here a football fan? There are lots of things that make the difference between a successful and less successful quarterback, but here's just one. You guys go watch on Saturdays and Sundays and look for this. When a quarterback takes the snap, drops back, and the rush and pressure comes, a mediocre quarterback will "get his eyes down." He looks at the rush. He's focused just a few feet in front of him and, most likely, making a bad throw or running for just a few yards. A successful quarterback, though, keeps his eyes up and downfield. He's feeling the rush, he might even be on the run, but he's looking at his receivers. He's seeing the bigger picture. Mary kept her eyes up. What Mary recognized, and what we have to take away from this, is that while the other things can be smaller blessings, the greatest blessing we can possibly receive is God Himself. The real blessings are not the little things God gives me for a brief time. The real blessing is God. For this reason, I can be of humble estate like Mary and still be blessed. I can be like Paul, able to endure all things, as long as I know that Christ is my savior. I can lose my job, my money, and my house, and still consider myself blessed. My health can be failing and I can still be blessed. I can lose family or loved one and still be blessed beyond measure because the presence of God is with me, eternal life is promised to me, and that is worth more than all these things. At Christmas, we can celebrate our blessing, regardless of our material situation, because we remember the moment that God gave us the greatest gift of all, Himself, in the person of Christ. We can echo Mary's song because even though we are of humble estate, He who is mighty has done great things for us.

The second thing we learn from Mary's song is this:

II. The Nature of God is Revealed in Christ

“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.”

The advent of Christ reveals the nature of God to us because Jesus is the revelation of God. Colossians 1 tells us He is the image of the invisible God. Dr. Steven McKinion, my theology professor, says over and over, “If you see the Son, you see the Father, because the Father is revealed in the Son.” So Mary, after praising God for the blessing He has given her, turns her attention to the nature of God and begins praising Him for who He is and what He’s done. This is also something we should do. A few weeks ago, during a small group lesson on prayer, I discussed with our students that their prayers should include times of simply praising God for who He is and what He’s done. Mary does the same thing here in her song. So let’s look at what these verses reveal to us about God and how these things are revealed in Christ.

The Characteristics of God

“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.”

I owe much of this point to Pastor J.D. Greear. Those of you who know me know that I love Pastor J.D.’s teaching and, as I was studying for this sermon, I came across a place where he mentioned that the three characteristics we see here in these verses, holiness, mercy, and might, come together to form the gospel.

First, God is holy. Not the way a lot of us think of holy, like if you raise your hands during worship or if you can quote more verses than John 3:16 and Philippians 4:13, you’re holier than the rest of us. God holiness means that He is perfect. He is wholly, completely perfect in a way that is beyond our comprehension. His holiness burns so brightly that our sin cannot approach it. Pastor J.D. says that our sin trying to approach God’s holiness is like an

ice cube trying to approach the surface of the sun. It's beyond the realm of possibility. And for that reason, mankind finds itself separated from God. And for that reason, God knew that if we were to be reconciled to Him, we would need something greater than ourselves to save us.

God is merciful. This mercy means that God did not leave us to die in our sins as would have been right and fair. God looked at us and had compassion on us, compassion that Isaiah compares to what a mother feels for her child. How many of you have ever wished you could take someone else's pain on yourself just to spare them from it? Even that, that you felt in that moment, cannot compare to the compassion God has and the mercy God has for His people. We aren't just in pain, we're traitors and criminals. But God's mercy is boundless. Mary says it is "from generation to generation."

God is mighty. Tim Keller says, "Because he's holy, he had to do something about our sin. Because he's merciful, he wanted to do something. Because he's mighty, he was able to do something." Several verses in Scripture call the Gospel "the power of God." This is the mighty work of the Mighty One, the thing that only He could do, to intervene in the course of humanity and break the curse of sin. Think of all the things we know God has done. Creating things like light and galaxies and oxygen and those weird animals with duck bills and beaver tails by speaking them into existence. Blocking out the sun and dividing an ocean to demonstrate his power to Egypt. Using a teenage sheep tender to kill a 9 1/2 foot tall trained and armored soldier. All great and mighty acts. But in His mightiest work of all, He destroyed the power of sin and death. He put them to shame. How? In the person of Christ.

Christ is the manifestation of these characteristics of God and it is this manifestation, this Incarnation, that we celebrate at Christmas. He is the image of the invisible God. He was holy and without sin, the thing we need to be, but cannot be. He was merciful, condescending

to come to Earth and take on flesh to rescue us. He was mighty, offering the final sacrifice that would appease the wrath of God and open the way to reconciliation with Him.

The Works of God

And then, we see the works of God in Mary's song.

"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."

As Mary sang these things, she was almost certainly remembering the works of God in Israel's history. She was likely remembering the stories of how God embarrassed the so-called gods of Egypt and rescued Israel from captivity, or how he led a tiny nation of wanderers to conquer the Promised Land, or how he rescued His people time and time again from their enemies, or how He returned the people of Israel to their land after seventy years of exile in Babylon. These were the works of God that she praised and these works were soon to be revealed again in Christ.

All of these things, the scattering of the proud, the bringing down of the mighty, the exalting of the humble, the filling of the hungry, are seen in the life and ministry of Christ, even from the very beginning. Who did the angel take the message of Christ's arrival to? The king? The emperor of Rome? No, to some shepherds in a field. Who did Christ spend His time with on Earth? The social outcasts. The marginalized. The demon-possessed. The broken. While He stood opposed to the proud religious establishment, he reached out to the ones that establishment turned its nose up at. The works of God, revealed in Christ, announce the arrival of what some call a "kingdom in reverse." You can't earn the king's favor. It is given through His grace. He doesn't curry favor with the proud and powerful. He opposes them. The last is made first and the first is made last. Mary experienced this firsthand through the birth of Christ and, through that same birth, we can do the same. While we remain in our pride, thinking that we can somehow earn our right standing with God, He opposes us. He

resists our legalistic efforts to corner Him into loving us or showing us mercy. But when we realize that we are the broken and the outcast and the ones in need of a Savior to do what we cannot do, God shows what Mary called “the strength of His arm.” He alone is able to exalt the low, to fill the hungry, and to raise the dead to life.

III. The Center of History is Christ

The third thing we see from Mary’s song is that the center of history, the purpose of history, is Christ. Read with me:

“He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

Here, at the close of her song, Mary remembered the covenant God made with Abraham. 2,000 years prior, God had promised to give Abraham a son, to make him a great nation (Israel), and to bless the world through Abraham’s offspring. Remember that this was 2,000 years ago. 2,000 years of waiting. 400 years of silence from God before this angel visited Mary. Many may have believed that the promises God made to Abraham didn’t even apply anymore, but Mary recognized that, in Christ, God was keeping His promise to Israel and keeping His promise to the world.

The offspring of Abraham that God would use to bless the whole world is Christ. This is why Matthew’s gospel opens with the genealogy of Christ, that long list of names that we always skip. (And “so-and-so” begat “can’t-pronounce-that” begat “that’s-a-made-up-word...”) He wrote in Matthew 1:1 that this is “the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Matthew was showing his Jewish readers that this Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. He is the offspring through which the world will be blessed. He is the focus of history. Mary recognized, as Matthew and others recognized later, that all of history, all of the events of the previous 2000 years, all of the messy, difficult,

shocking incidents you find in that genealogy like Judah and Tamar, David and Bathsheba, Boaz marrying the Moabite Ruth, all the evil, broken kings of Israel, the Jewish exile to Babylon, all of these things had been leading up to this moment: The birth of Christ. The Incarnation of God. The return of the King.

Last week, we talked about hope and how the birth of Christ was the dawning of that hope, because He is the center of history. He is the dawning of the hope that mankind had been waiting desperately for from the moment that Adam and Eve ate fruit that they were told not to in the Garden. At that moment, God launched a rescue plan that wove and wound its way through thousands of years until, at the right time, Christ appeared. He is the center of history. His birth is the arrival of our hope. You cannot overstate the magnitude of that moment. One of my favorite Christmas songs, off a Third Day album, has a chorus that says, "Hallelujah, the king is here!" One of my favorite lines from a worship song we sing here says, "Open up the gates! Make way before the King of Kings! The God who comes to save is here to set the captives free!" This is what we celebrate at Christmas. This is what Mary celebrated in her song. The promise of Abraham, the purpose of history, the King of Kings, is here. He is the center of history. Everything that happened before His incarnation was leading to His arrival. Everything that has come after is leading to the moment when He returns in power to make all things new.

So, what do we do with this knowledge? How do we apply it to our lives? We do the same thing Mary did. We magnify the Lord and lead our spirits to rejoice in God our Savior. To magnify means to make great, to exalt, to praise. Spend your Christmas season rejoicing in who God is and what He's done. Rejoice in the blessing of the gift of His presence. Rejoice in his character and works that extend grace and mercy to us, the worst of sinners. Rejoice that He is the purpose, fulfillment, and center of history. Magnify Him, make Him great, before your family, your co-workers, your friends, your enemies, and whoever else you meet this season.

In preparing for this message, I came across this quote: “What we magnify, we will rejoice in, and what we rejoice in, we magnify.” Christ-follower, rejoice in God so that you can magnify Him this Christmas season.

If you are here this morning and you recognize that you need this hope because you have never repented of your sin and responded in faith to Christ, I invite you to come forward this morning. What better time to begin a new life in Christ than in the season we use to celebrate the birth of our Savior? Join us as we worship this morning.