

**Sermon for Advent 4
Year C**

[RCL] Micah 5:2-5a; Canticle 3 or 15 or Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

“My heart exults in the Lord ... My strength is exalted in my God ...”

Sound familiar?

Today we hear the Magnificat, that great song of Mary that the author of Luke and Acts has blessed us with.

But this quote isn't from the Magnificat. It's not even from the gospels. It's from the Book of Samuel. It's sung by another pregnant woman, Hannah the mother of Samuel, the great priest and prophet.

Hannah was unable to conceive and bear children because we are told, “The Lord had closed her womb.” In time, however, she does conceive and when she dedicates her son – her only son – to the temple, to become a priest she sings a song. Luke uses this song as a model for Mary's song.

In both the mighty are laid low, and the lowly are raised up. God is active and acting in the world. And so these women sing, “My heart exults in the Lord!” “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

That's an arresting phrase: My soul **magnifies** the Lord. **MY** soul magnifies the Lord. This is sometimes translated as “my soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,” which means sort of the same thing. But there's something more profound in saying “my soul magnifies the Lord.”

The more traditional (Rite I) version of the Magnificat has yet another translation that opens up an even deeper level, a more profound paradox.

It reads, “My soul doth magnify the Lord,” and then a little later it says, “For he that is mighty hath magnified me.” I magnify the Lord, but the Lord also magnifies me. It's a double magnification and it's maybe a little “through the looking-glass.”

But that's where we are in Advent. Advent prepares us for Christmas, which takes us through the looking glass. There, everything looks familiar but everything is utterly and profoundly different. Because God has become incarnate, enfleshed, one of us, and that changes everything.

At the beginning of the service we prayed “that when Jesus comes he will find in our hearts a mansion prepared for him.” That should sound familiar too. In John's great mystical account of the God-magnifying life of Jesus, Jesus says that he goes to prepare a mansion for us (“in my father's house are many mansions ... I go to prepare a place for you.” John 14:2) And now as we are on the cusp of welcoming God (again) – recognizing God as living and moving and acting among us (again) – we are told to prepare a mansion for God. You know the song: “Let every heart, prepare Him room.” We are told to prepare God a space, so that God might be born again in us. So that we might be born again. Our souls, our bodies, our very being will thereby magnify the greatness of God.

We delight in singing about the mighty works of God this time of year. We find it easy and comforting to sing about what God brings about in the world. We sing about God bringing joy and peace. Mary's song invites us to consider not only the what, but also the how. The Magnificat can be read as an invitation to sing along with Mary about our part in that divine action. This is what Jesus' incarnation tells us. It's what Mary is telling us. That God goes about bringing peace, and joy, and love, and hope to the world through us. By magnifying God's grace and spirit through us.

"My soul magnifies the Lord," can mean that through me, through you, through us others can see the Lord more clearly. Through me and through you, through the way we choose to live our lives and practice our faith in the world people can catch a sustained glimpse of that peaceful kingdom. They can experience the righteous reign of God's justice and peace. They can share in God's dream of shalom.

Through each of us, through our words and our actions, through all that we do, we magnify God. We magnify God's being with our own bodies. We magnify God's action with our own practices. We magnify God's word with our words in the world.

God is the one who acts. We magnify that action and give it hands and feet and hearts and minds. We collaborate with God in the divine actions of lifting up of the lowly, feeding the hungry. A good question to meditate on in the remaining time before Christmas might be: how do I magnify the Lord?

That's a big question. It's easy to think that it's too big for any one of us to handle. But another important lesson the Magnificat teaches is that you are enough. Whoever you are, whatever you have or haven't done, you are enough. The song of Mary reminds us that all of the scripture points to the little, the lowly, the "who me?" as the vehicle for salvation.

Bethlehem is nothing special. Hannah is a long-suffering, put upon other wife who endures the incessant teasing of the wife who **is** able to bear children. Elizabeth was also thought to be barren, and endured disgrace because of it.

And Mary is no one. An underage woman from a nowhere town – Nazareth ("what good can come from there?") – engaged to someone we're told is from the house of David but that doesn't really make Joseph all that special; a lot of people were distantly related to David.

All throughout scripture whenever God wants to do something it's the little, the ordinary, the unexceptional that God uses. When God wants to create God reaches into the mud. When God wants to raise up a king for Israel, God chooses the youngest of many children, the one sent out to watch the flocks. When God wants to redeem all of creation God enters that creation fully and completely as one of the most vulnerable creatures on the planet, a human child.

It is through human beings, through human flesh, the substance that is also the vehicle for all sin in the world. It's through this fragile and easily broken substance that salvation happens. It is through us that God works. Through us that God is magnified.

In Acts, St. Paul says that “God is that in which we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28) Mary reminds us that we are how God lives and moves and brings about God’s will in the world.

It is not through magic, but through a human being. Through Mary, and her child Jesus, and with the help of the Holy Spirit through apostles, prophets and martyrs – and even through us – that God transforms God’s dream of shalom into the reality of God’s realm of justice and peace.

And just like Mary and Hannah, though little, we are enough. Each of us is enough to magnify God. Imagine what would happen if we let God work. If we truly made room for God to be born in our hearts. If we let God magnify the good work that God has begun and is already doing in each of us. What if we joined together with others to magnify that work? Imagine the world that would be born from that.

As we prepare to welcome Christ once more into our hearts and our homes, may our souls magnify more and more the glory of God and our hearts exult in the goodness of God, this day and always.

Amen.

Written by The Rev. Richard Burden, PhD

The Rev. Dr. Richard Burden was called as Rector of All Saints Parish in 2014. Born and raised in Colorado, Richard received a BA in Theatre Arts from Colorado State University, an MA in history from the University of Colorado at Denver and a PhD from the University of Chicago, where he studied Christian conversion in early 20th century China. He began his first career as a bookseller working at the Tattered Cover in Denver, and after a journey through academia he discerned a call to ordained ministry which led him to the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, in Berkeley, CA. Richard was ordained in 2009 and was first called to the Episcopal Diocese of Lexington to serve as Priest in Charge, and also to help develop a groundbreaking program of leadership and congregational development known as The Network for Pastoral Leadership. In 2013, he began to sense God calling him in a new direction, this time to New England. He is a Fellow of the Beatitudes Society. He says, “I went into ordained ministry because I wanted to be a catalyst for individuals and communities to become the people that God needs them to be and to do the work God so urgently needs them to do.” With his spouse Monica, he is also a parent to two school aged children. His recorded sermons are available at allsaintsbrookline.org, you can contact him through the All Saints Brookline Facebook page, twitter @allsaintsbline, and instagram.

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