

Meditations on the Magnificat: My Soul Magnifies the Lord

Luke 1:46-55

Luke's Gospel Songs of Advent and Christmas

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First Sunday of Advent - Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Advent and Christmas are times of singing. The original carols are the four songs in Luke about the coming Messiah: Mary's Song – the Magnificat – “My Soul Magnifies the Lord;” Zechariah's Song – the Benedictus – “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel;” The Angel's Song – the Gloria – “Glory to God in the Highest;” Simeon's Song – the Nunc Dimmittus – “Lord, Now Dismiss Your Servant in Peace.” All of the songs, hymns and carols help us to join Mary, Zechariah, Simeon, and the Angels in the ancient spiritual discipline of magnifying God. Advent is the growing anticipation and the intensifying expectation—helping us to magnify the Lord.

Let us pray. O Lord, now may your Spirit stir us that we might hear your call, not only to worship, but to put into action your grace in the world. And so, guide us to do so, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

You may remember the Disney movie, “Honey, I Shrunk the Kids,” where the errant scientist dad mistakenly used his mysterious ray gun to reduce the size of his kids to smaller than ants. The miniature size and the perspective of the kids made the rest of the world seem gigantic. Things that were normally insignificant to them became huge problems and monsters. Their experience of shrinking had the reverse affect of magnifying the threat and horror of everything else.

If a good God shrinks, in the sight of our world, everything else becomes a larger threat, from our human perspective. If God is not magnified in our sight, other things will be magnified. If our perspective of the goodness of God is reduced, the evil of the world will appear even more oppressive. If we amplify the size of our troubles, we reduce our ability to see the magnitude of God's gracious power to redeem the world. This is why the magnification of God by humanity is so important and powerful. To magnify God is to increase our attention and awareness of God—at the same time, to reduce our anxiety about a world that is seemingly growing in chaos.

The prophet Isaiah (chapter 10, verses 12-19) had a lot to say about the magnification of God and what is at stake. He says,

When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant—those who boast and those who have haughty pride. [For God says,] “By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding. I have removed the boundaries of peoples and have plundered their treasures; like a bull, I have brought down those who sat on thrones...Shall the axe vaunt itself over the one who wields it; or the saw magnify itself against the one who handles it?”

It is Biblical and it is human to magnify, which really means: “to make large...” “to declare great”... “to show power”... to increase... to extol... to exalt... to lift high... to build up. Magnification is about size and power. Who is big and who is little? Who is powerful and who is weak? Who is Sovereign and who is vassal? Magnification is about coming to grips with how big God is... and how small we are. Magnification is about realizing that we see only a fragment of the totality of God—often because we are so busy magnifying the smallness of who we are.

There are some ways in which we falsify magnification. A distortion of magnification is when we spend time making the trivial, bigger... and the substantial, smaller. A devaluation of magnification is our human temptation to make ourselves, our opinions, and our desires more and more important— while reducing God's grace and God's revelation to nothing. Warped magnification is about expecting human leaders to be ‘messiahs,’ while ignoring or dismissing Jesus Christ as Messiah.

In western culture, we are guilty of creating our own fictional version, or film: “Honey, I Shrunk God and Blew Myself Up.”

Or the atheist version: “Because I am a god, there is no need for a greater God.”

Or the advocate’s version in Washington, DC: “My opinion is everything, and I will amplify my version until you can’t hear anyone else... especially God.”

Or the political version: “I will seem bigger and better if I can belittle my opponent and make them seem uglier and more depraved. If I look better, of course, my opponents will look worse.”

Or the media version of magnification, because of what we seem to be hungry for in our culture: “Bad news sells; let’s increase it. Good news doesn’t sell; let’s reduce it.”

Or then there’s the stunted church version that haunts many of our churches today : “If we pay more attention to ourselves, we will pay less attention to God and to the needs of the world God is trying to save. We can make the church more about ourselves... and less about God, or the mission of Jesus. The more we wrap ourselves up in denominational or congregational concerns, the less we have to attend to the Good News as the world’s solution.”

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was an example of how God magnifies the insignificant and ignores the world’s definition of the magnificent. God sends a very special envoy to Mary—a young woman with no name, in a little town—to tell her that she is especially favored by God.

The young Mary was, of course, perplexed by this. She was perplexed as to why God would bother sending an angel to visit ‘little old her.’ She was not a man; she was not an elder. She was not a rabbi; she was not a prophet. She was not a princess. She was not a national leader. She was not even important in her home village. So she pondered what was really going on here.

And in the disciplines of Mary’s ability to magnify—in the reflections of her mind... in the meditations of her heart... in the contemplations of her soul... she began to make sense of what was happening to her. The more she thought about God—that is, who God is, and what God does—the more it made sense why God would pick her. The more she magnified God’s grace, nature, and character, the less she focused on herself. But she gained clarity about why this might happen —because she began to remember the ancient acts of God... what the prophets had said about God. And then she gained wisdom for herself, as she meditated.

The more she thought about God, the larger God became... and the more reality she saw about her world, and about herself. The more she lingered in God’s grace and presence, the better she understood why God would give her such an important role in the saving of the world. The bigger God became to her, the smaller her apprehensions and anxieties. Many of the prophets understood this, especially John the Baptist—who said it in as simple way as possible, when he was talking about Jesus: “He must increase, and I must decrease.”

Mary pondered the magnificence of God and understood, in that light, her own humility. From her personal encounter with God and her study of Isaiah and the other prophets, she wrote her own song:

God has looked with favor upon the lowliness of this servant. The Mighty One has done great things for me. God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. The Mighty One has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and God has lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and he has sent the rich away with empty stomachs.

Mary discovered and understood: it is God who maximizes and minimizes human potential—because Mary came to see God in bigger and bigger ways. She entered regularly into conversation with God... with herself... in her soul... her mind... and her heart— to expand her view of God, and shrink her view of human power. She worked at magnifying her trust in God and shrinking her fear of human control. She

entered into that ancient spiritual discipline of “magnifying the Lord,” which puts everything else into right proportion and balanced perspective.

God gives humanity the ability to magnify... or to shrink... according to what we understand is important. We can make the Hubble Telescope see 12 billion light years away. And we can make an electron microscope to enlarge something by a factor of two million times. God gives us the ability, and the disciplines, and the tools to magnify... to shrink the largest and the farthest... the smallest and the closest... or to enlarge them.

God has given us the spiritual tools to do the same. We magnify or shrink God in what we say and do. It is not as though we make God bigger; but we come to grips with how big God really is. We magnify God if what God says is what we do; but we shrink God if we only ‘talk the talk’ and don’t ‘walk the walk.’ We shrink God if our work does not match our worship. Easy here, on Sunday morning, to sing the songs of Advent and to feel the joy of being together in God’s presence; harder to go out and put God’s presence into practice. Mary not only magnified God in her singing, but more so magnified God by putting her own body on the line.

How we envision God—as compared to ourselves—is very important. We can choose to see...

That God is bigger; therefore our problems are smaller.

The stronger that God is, the lighter our burdens.

The more powerful God is, the less we fear powerful people and intimidating systems.

The greater Almighty God is, the less significant other rulers are.

And so, when the angel Gabriel has finished telling Mary that she will become pregnant by the Spirit of God... as she has pondered all this in her heart... as she realizes how huge God is and how insignificant human opinion will become about her...as she confronts the lesser social pressures and the temporary evaluations of her surprise pregnancy, in light of the grand purposes of an Eternal God... she comes to a humble conclusion: “Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.” When we magnify God, we more fully see our humble roles as servants of God—extensions of the magnificence of God.

And when we come to the Table of our Lord Jesus Christ today, we give up focus on ourselves; we become fascinated with Jesus as the Son of God. By coming to this Table, we magnify the life and the words of Jesus... the acts of Jesus... and the grace of Jesus toward each of us. By coming to this Table, we declare what Mary declared: “Here we are, Lord. Let it be with us according to your word.” For Lord, you are great and we are small. But you have invited us into your gracious presence. And at this meal, you have humbled the proud and you have lifted up the poor.

So this meal is not about you or me; it is about Jesus. Jesus is the host... Jesus is the presence. At this meal, we magnify Jesus. He invites us to come in close and to dine with him. And the closer we get to Jesus, the bigger Jesus becomes. Put Jesus under your microscope today, here at this Table—take a long and deep look at him. Linger with him here. Listen to him and study him. Eat fully of all who he is. Receive his complete being and immerse your life in his life. Share his body and drink from his cup. Absorb his healing and transfuse his forgiveness.

Get up close and personal with Jesus today. Feel the breath of his Spirit upon you. Look into his welcoming eyes as he gazes toward you with love. Soak up the vibrancy of his humanity before you and listen to the life of his words, spoken to you. Watch the humble action of his service lead you. Smell the pungent fragrance of his death near you. And see the brilliant light of his resurrection before you. Take the time in your soul to magnify the Lord Jesus Christ—not to make him bigger than he is, but to allow him to become as huge as he is.

And during this Advent season, invest in the exponential magnification of God in Jesus Christ with your

life. For God was in Mary of Nazareth to increase the Spirit's presence: the Mighty One in her soul also became the Incarnate One in her body. As she grew in the presence of the Lord, the presence of the Lord grew in her. And so, we are encouraged to sing with Mary, Psalm 34:

I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise shall be continually in my mouth.

My soul makes its boast in the Lord. Let the humble hear and be glad.

O magnify the Lord with me, And let us exalt his name together.

For his name is Jesus, the Christ; the son of Mary, Son of God; Savior of the world, and Lord of all.

And so, this Advent, let us anticipate and radiate his humble magnificence. Let us magnify this little baby, born of Mary— Son of God.

Let us pray. And so we bow in the magnificence of your intimate presence, Lord Jesus Christ... the power of your Spirit... completely surrounded by the love of God the Father. May you transform us to share in the full image and stature of Jesus Christ. Amen.