Magnify!

Luke1:39-56

When I was ten years old, my parents took the whole family to see a movie that had captured the hearts of people the world over. In my hometown, it became the longest continually shown movie of all time…eight months straight in the Broadmoor Theatre. It was “The Sound of Music.” What kept people going to see it, often for the third and fourth time, was, well, everything, the plot, the actors, the songs that were all quickly memorized and sung by children when they went back to their homes (yes, including me). You too! Oh yes. I know for a fact that you too simply remember your favorite things, and then you don’t feel so bad! That’s a good song. Nothing wrong with that song.

At the time, I couldn’t get over how this family, the von Trapp family, every time they turned around, would bust out singing these incredible songs that all became hits. All they had to do was open their mouths and out they came with a symphony in the background. How coincidental is that? I started imagining how easy it would be for me to come out with songs like that right off the top of my head the way they did. Get up in the morning and eat my cold breakfast. Climb in the school bus, it’s cold in the school bus. I tried, but it just didn’t work. I suppose if I asked Rogers and Hammerstein, they’d say, “Some have it, some don’t!”

I’m here to tell you, on the day she visited her cousin, Mary had it. Filled with the Holy Spirit, she sang out: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” What is known as the Magnificat, it is her song of joy for what the Lord has done. It’s fascinating, when you get inside the birth narratives of Jesus, how people can’t help but sing. There’s Mary and the Magnificat, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, singing out with his song, what is known as the Benedictus. Then there are the angels who sang out in heavenly chorus the Gloria. Even old Simeon, hanging in there with his last breath before dying, assured by the Holy Spirit that his getting’ up day won’t come until he had seen the Savior with his own eyes. And when at last he does, he too breaks forth in singing. “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation.” My eyes, have seen your salvation. You can make a song out of those words. And he did!

I’d like to say that the whole world was singing when Jesus was born, but that wouldn’t be true. The truth is, those who believed were the ones who sang or who were swept off their feet with the singing, the shepherds, Mary and Elizabeth, Joseph and Zechariah, and of course the angels. They believed. They sang out.

We also believe. We come to worship believing, perhaps more at this time of the year than any other time. I wish I had been there to hear all the singing. The words alone can move one to bow down and worship. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Isn’t that the heart of worship, what Mary is saying here, singing here? When we come together on Sunday mornings, the first thing we want to do is magnify the Lord. Literally, we enlarge God.

That may sound strange. How can we enlarge God who is God? God can’t get any bigger. There is nothing you and I can do to make God any greater than he is. But what this means, this Magnificat, when Mary magnifies the Lord, it isn’t what she is doing to God. It is what’s happening inside Mary. Her soul is increasing in the joy and the love of the Lord. She is making God big in her life. We want to do that too.

I always knew God was big. I never knew just how big God could be. It used to be that God was who I thought about when I went to church, or at the dinner table when saying the blessing. The rest of the time, I was concentrating on other things. It’s easy to compartmentalize God that way and forget that God is a part of everything we do and everything we are. The psalmist declares, “O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up.” According to the psalmist, even our thoughts are intimately known. God knows us so well, it says God knows our words even before we speak them. In fact, God has already numbered our days on earth before we were even born. If you can comprehend that, then you are the only one. God is too big for the human mind to fathom. But God is never so big as when you need him.

Twenty-one years ago, I had a physical condition that required surgery. Before this, I had never had a major physical problem. I ended up spending thirteen days in the hospital, and for the first time, there came a point when I feared for my life. Things weren’t going very well. I was a minister, and ministers were visiting me. Ministers are usually pretty good about not showing in their faces how serious things are, and here they were with serious looks on their faces. That got my attention! I began reading the Psalms and turned to Psalm 911, the emergency Psalm, Psalm 91, verse 11, “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” I read that passage over and over and over, and I experienced in a way that I had never known before, how much I depended on God for literally everything I have, every breath, every step, for every day of my life--everything. I realized God must be mighty big to take time out of his busy day to get me back on my feet, to help one human being out of a planet of over six billion people. That’s a big God.

In her case, Mary was pregnant with a child that was not from her betrothed husband. In those days, that was much worse than public scandal. It was scandalous, but it was also a crime of disgrace against Joseph’s family, and her own. She immediately left her home town and spent the next three months with her cousin Elizabeth, away from people who knew, or who thought they knew what had happened, away from the family disgrace of a pregnancy out of wedlock. It’s interesting, and perhaps telling, that we hear nothing about Mary’s parents. If they were like most parents at that time, they would have been mortified upon hearing the news of her pregnancy. Without angels offering reassurance, they would only conclude the worst. I wonder if Mary had much of any interactions with her parents and kin after the announcement. That happens sometimes in families. By law, Joseph should have divorced her, but they had both been assured that the child was special, that her pregnancy was holy, conceived by God, and that her son would bring about the salvation of the world.

They trusted the angel. They believed God was big enough to do that. Perhaps the greatest miracle of Christmas, with the exception of the birth of Jesus himself, is the faith Mary and Joseph had when they took God at his word. They and the few others who believed. They trusted God when the world told them her pregnancy was a sin. Mary magnified the Lord through her faith.

In her song, the Magnificat, Mary’s faith in God simply could not be contained. It kept magnifying. Why? “…for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant….”

And what is true for Mary is true for us all! That’s the good news of the Magnificat. The song doesn’t begin and end with Mary. It is for everyone. “His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” Mary’s good news is our good news!

Have you ever noticed how unexpected and interesting things often happen at the end of the year? Sad and joyful things, quite often a mix of both. That’s life. I’m always amazed when we see replays on TV of all that has happened in the previous year. It makes me glad I can’t see into the future. It’s too much for us to take in. Faith is when you can look back at all that happened in your life that year and see where, but for the grace of God “go you,” when you can lift up your voice and rejoice that God saw you through those rough days, hard days, stressful days when you didn’t know you would make it, when you were not sure how things would turn out, but somehow they did. God’s grace, permeating your life, giving you the strength you needed, the endurance, the courage to face whatever had to be faced, and with God’s help, you made it. Along with Mary, we realize how great, how magnificent is our God. **That’s the first miracle of Christmas: the dawn of faith in God’s greatness, in God’s promise to save us.**

According to her words, God’s mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation. Surely you and I have generously experienced God’s mercy. But there is an aspect to her song Christians sometimes overlook, and it is this favored business. **It’s the second miracle of Christmas**. If you listen to her song carefully, you’ll understand what this means. God shows favor in specific ways, to specific people, to the poor, the hungry, the powerless, to those who have been denied opportunities to lead productive lives. They are the ones, by the way, who readily tend to turn to the only one who can save.

Of course, few of us, if any, are lowly or poor or hungry or powerless, not in the biblical sense. Most of us have a car, a job, an income, roof over our heads, food to eat, a cell phone, a laptop or tablet, a TV. We have a place in our community, friends. So how do we identify with those who are favored by God?

You have to understand. According to scripture, God takes sides. God always takes sides. You recall when it was a contest between Elijah and the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal, it was God’s prophet Elijah who won. God sided with his servant David when he squared off with Goliath, even though Goliath was a giant. When others complained that Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners, he tells them he came for their sake, not for those who have no need of a physician. According to our bible, according to Mary’s song, God takes sides.

I suppose it explains why we love to see the underdog win. It was thrilling to see our own PCM Mustangs out-run, out-tackle, out-throw and out-score the whole state of Iowa. Two teeny-tiny towns defeating the whole state. Talk about David and Goliath. I can’t help but think that God smiled on that. In the past, there have been times when I have been asked to offer an invocation at the beginning of a game. I remember one occasion, when a representative called me up and asked me to pray for their next district game, but over the course of our conversation learned that I was from the opposing team’s hometown, a team he feared would win, and he took back the invitation! “I’m so sorry, we forgot. We already asked someone else.” Now, I don’t believe God rigs football games, but I do believe God takes sides.

God smiles when we take sides with those whom God takes sides, those whom God favors. Clothing the poor, visiting the sick, providing opportunities for the marginalized, being good neighbors to those who have felt judged or ostracized simply for who they are, the victimized, the helpless, the powerless, helping those who are down and out, strangers who have no connections, those who do not know where their next meal is coming. Don’t misunderstand, Mary’s song isn’t referring to freeloaders. Tennessee Ernie Ford once described a co-worker, saying he started out at the bottom of the ladder and more or less liked it there. That’s not who Mary is singing about, people who don’t try, who don’t lift a finger. God’s favor is on those who, through no fault of their own, struggle to survive, who haven’t had a decent chance at life, who have never had a chance to get a leg up on the first rung of the ladder. Those are whom God favors.

When it comes to the church, God certainly takes sides. Churches that are involved in ministry to people Mary described in her song are the churches that are filled with God’s favor. Over the years, I’ve known a couple of churches that, for various reasons, became inwardly focused, congregations who somehow lost their connection, their identity with their community. Either the community changed, or they changed, and the congregation insulated itself. Fear, suspicion, and distrust can do that. It takes courage to be a congregation, to reach out to those whom God favors.

One of the professors at my seminary shared the story of the first church he pastored, a tiny, rural church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. During his time there, the population exploded with laborer’s who had been brought in to work at the nuclear plants the state of Tennessee had recently developed. The minister wanted to attract the workers to the church. There was just one problem. The church didn’t want them.

Before long, the area was filled with recreational vehicles and trucks. Tents sprang up all across the landscape. His church was next door to all this, and so the pastor naturally began to think of ways to be in ministry with these new residents. He called a meeting after church the next Sunday to discuss possibilities. One church member said, “Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think they’d fit in here. They’re just temporary. They’re construction people. They’ll be leaving soon.” The pastor tried convincing them of the spiritual obligation to reach out to these people. It was decided that a vote would be taken the next Sunday. Next Sunday came, and one church member said, “I move that in order to be a member of this church, you must own property in the county.” The move was quickly seconded and passed.

Years later, this same minister, now a well-known preacher, professor, and author, returned to Oak Ridge to show his wife the first church he pastored, and he was amazed when he finally found the tiny church. It was still there. The parking lot was filled to capacity. The church itself never looked better. It had a fresh coat of paint, complete new siding, new landscaping. They entered and were warmly greeted and shown a place to sit. The place was full. People were laughing, children were having fun. The place had changed. The church had been converted into a restaurant.

Our God takes sides with those who need to hear good news, the Mary’s, the shepherds, the lowly, temporary laborers, migrant workers, those who’ve been laid off, people down on their luck, homeless mothers who worry how to feed and clothe their children, recovering alcoholics and drug addicts. They are the ones who understand better than anybody else the need for a Savior, and who aren’t too proud to call on his name. To them the Savior shows favor. Inasmuch as we side with them, he sides with us.

Earlier I said how interesting and unexpected things happen at the end of the year. One of these things is the latest superhero movie. They always come out this time of the year. Seems there’s always some new superhero movie. I’ve pretty much seen them all, all the Batman’s, Superman, Wonder Woman, Iron Man, Black Panther, Dr. Strange, Spider Man, Captain America, Ant Man, The Green Lantern. I believe this year it’s Aqua Man. Anybody seen Aqua Man?

We are fascinated with the idea of a rescuer, someone who can do incredible things, who can save the day, who stands up against the evils and injustice in this world and defeats it with a one-two knock-out punch. Someone who can right the wrong, and defend the helpless. We long for someone who is mighty to save.

Look! Up in the sky! It’s a bird. It’s a plane! It’s your imagination. They don’t exist. None of them. They are all make believe.

Except for one, born in poverty, who walked on water, healed the sick, raised the dead, who paid for our sins and triumphed over the grave. **He** is our Superman, our God-man, our Savior. Magnify his name, and worship him. Let all God’s people say AMEN!