

“Magnify the Lord”

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[Luke 1:46-55](#)

In December 1960, the residents of Snyder Hall on the campus of The University of Illinois began what has now become a 57-year tradition. During finals week each December, they host “Dial-A-Carol,” during which anyone can call and request that the volunteer answering sing them a Christmas carol. Last year the program logged more than 10,000 calls. All 50 states were covered within the first 24 hours of the event, and calls were received from 75 countries. It’s a really fun tradition and receives a great deal of media coverage. If you haven’t called in before, the number is 217-332-1882. This year, I’ve been tempted – though I haven’t given in to the temptation – to call and ask them to sing some of the wonderful *Magnificat* that we’re hearing this morning. It’s probably best that I haven’t requested it, as I don’t know how many of the student volunteers sing in Latin. That’s not the only reason, though. This music that we’re hearing today isn’t typically played on the *All Christmas Music* channels, either, and probably not just because it’s in Latin. If the lovely music were sung with English lyrics on the radio, some might just call in to complain about how upset they are with such seditious lyrics interrupting their holiday joy.

The *Magnificat* is taken directly from Luke 1. It is a song which Mary sings after learning that she would become the earthly mother of the Son of God. It is an incredible song of faith and trust and hope. It is also an affront to the powers of Mary’s day – and ours. Mary sings:

[God] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

Good news – as long as you don’t happen to be proud or powerful or rich. In those cases, you might not hear these words of Mary in quite the same way. If you are proud and don’t wish to be scattered, if you are powerful and don’t want to be brought down from your throne, if you are rich and don’t want to be sent away empty, then these words do not provide hope and comfort; they are, in fact, a threat. The powerful do not relinquish power easily. Staying on their thrones is much preferred. The rich do not like to be sent away empty. Staying well-fed is much preferred. Herod follows the expected script for a ruler when he hears about the birth of this so-called Messiah – he tries to find him to eliminate this threat. Rulers today – no matter what sphere they rule – follow the expected script, as well. When their rule is challenged, they often go on the offensive, lashing out at others in whatever way they can. No, the powerful rarely step down from their thrones willingly, and this is why the song of Mary is not just some nice Christmas carol. This song of Mary is revolutionary. Mary understands the birth of Jesus to inaugurate a new day, a day

in which the whole world is turned upside down. And turning the world upside down is not a harmless, peaceful task. It is not something which will be done without upsetting the current system, a system which benefits the wealthy and powerful, so we can count on them doing everything they can to resist the subversive nature of this revolution.

Notice, though, the verb tense. Mary sings of a God who *has already* set things right. Can't she just look around and see that's not true? Can't we do the same now? Noted preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says "Prophets almost never get their verb tenses straight, because part of their gift is being able to see the world as God sees it – not divided into things that are already over and things that have not happened yet, but as an eternally unfolding mystery that surprises everyone...The one thing that is absolutely sure in this scenario is that we have a God who is with us and for us and who wants us to have life." Taylor continues: "Mary's trust in that fact is really all she has. What she does not have is a sonogram, or a husband, or an affidavit from the Holy Spirit that says 'The child really is mine. Now leave the poor girl alone.' All she has is her unreasonable willingness to believe that the God who has chosen her will be part of whatever happens next – and that, apparently, is enough to make her burst into song. She does not wait to see how things will turn out first. She sings ahead of time..."¹

What a great phrase. Can we, too, sing ahead of time? Can we trust that God's reign of equality and justice is a *fait accompli*?

Mary longed for a better world, a world in tune with God's intentions. She understood that living under oppression was no way to live, that there was no reason that the poor should go hungry while the rich ate more than their fill, that those wielding power unjustly had no right to be in power. And Mary saw all of this as coming to fruition through the birth of her son.

What do we see this Christmas? Do we see the revolutionary impact of the coming of the Messiah, or do we more often see the list of gifts yet to be bought? Do we see the hopeful possibilities of a world turned upside down, or are we much more comfortable with the status quo? Do we see the inbreaking of a society built on justice, equality, and respect, or do we prefer the current society built on fear of others, inequality, and maintaining power at all costs?

Just when we are getting so close to the joy of Christmas Day, Mary sneaks into our Advent preparations and sings of revolution. Perhaps if she just said that God has shown great strength, we'd be fine, but she continues to say "he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts." Maybe if she stopped at saying God has filled the hungry with good things, we'd be OK, but she continues to say "and sent the rich away empty." Perhaps if she only said that he has lifted up the lowly, we wouldn't be so concerned, but she also says "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones." And the truth is that she is singing about many of *us*. We are often the ones who are proud, rich and powerful. We are often the ones whose lives will be affected if God's order truly comes to pass, and so we sometimes provide lip service to following in the way of the Messiah, when to do so would actually remove *us* from our thrones.

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Home By Another Way*. (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999), page 18.

This Christmas, will we be content with the status quo, or we will join in the work of our God in upending systems of injustice, where the wealthy get wealthier at the expense of the poor, where people are treated unfairly because of the color of their skin, where xenophobia runs rampant, where those of different religions are demeaned and lumped together as terrorists, where the cry is to keep out refugees, forgetting that Jesus and his family themselves had to flee to Egypt to escape the violence of Herod? Mary makes clear which side God is on and where we should align ourselves if we are going to follow the reign of the Messiah.

Mary's song is known as the Magnificat because of the first word in Latin, which is the word magnify. Mary says "my soul magnifies the Lord." To magnify has two definitions: the more religious definition is to glorify, but the more standard definition is to make something easier to see by enlarging our view of it. Mary sings of praise of God, but maybe she's also singing of how she will enable others to see God. So, what will we magnify during these final days of Advent and into the season of Christmas? My prayer is that we will all seek to see the image of the Christ in ourselves and in others so that we will magnify the goodness, justice, grace, and mercy of our God, this Christmas and always, as we join Mary in singing ahead of time. Amen.