

Magnifying the Lord
Luke 1:39-55

(Read Luke 1:39-49)

The passage that I would like for us to look at today is traditionally referred to as the “Magnificat”. This name is derived from the first word of Mary’s song in the Latin translation: “Magnificat anima mea Dominum”.

(Boy, I just KNEW that the Latin which they made me learn in Holland would pay off some day!!)

In today’s fourth advent service, my text is derived from the beautiful prayer that Mary sings to the Lord in Luke chapter 1. There are a couple of elements of this prayer that are rather fascinating. I was doing some research on the Magnificat on the internet, and I found one website that said this about this prayer: “It is the Virgin Mary’s joyous prayer in response to the Angel Gabriel’s annunciation to her that she will become the mother of the Son of God” (Women for Faith and Family, www.wf-f.com). But when we look at this story in Luke’s Gospel, this is not true at all.

In Luke chapter 1, Luke tells about Gabriel’s announcement to Mary of her miraculous pregnancy in verses 26-38. Mary’s song of praise to God is NOT found immediately in verses 39 and following. Rather, Mary does not sing her song of praise until verses 46 and following. When we look at Mary’s response to Gabriel’s announcement, Luke tells us that her only words were these: “May it be to me as you said”. Now, I’m not sure how you want to

interpret these words of Mary, but personally, I do not find any “joyous prayer or triumphant song” in these words: “May it be to me as you have said.” Certainly we can detect a receptive and obedient Mary in these words, but Mary’s response to Gabriel and his announcement that she was going to become pregnant with the “Son of the Most High”, NOT through the agency of a man but through the agency of the Holy Spirit, was not a response of joy and singing. Despite the clear indication of Mary’s acceptance and obedience to the messenger of God in her words—“May it be to me as you have said”—I think that Mary was troubled and terrified.

The fact of the matter is that the young, unmarried virgin Mary was pregnant. How do you explain this “miracle” to the smirking men and gossiping women of the town square? How do you make your parents believe THIS explanation of the surprising pregnancy?

In her troubled embarrassment, Mary quickly packs her things and “hurries” (Luke tells us) to the hill country of Judea to visit her relative Elizabeth. The angel had told Mary that Elizabeth was also the recipient of a miraculous pregnancy. But as we compare these two pregnancies, we have to recognize that there is a significant difference! Elizabeth was experiencing a miraculous pregnancy *while she was married!* How would she react to the *unmarried* pregnancy of the teenaged Mary? Luke tells us about Elizabeth’s reaction to Mary in verses 41-45. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s voice, her

unborn child leapt within her womb and Elizabeth declared to the anxious Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear.”

It is in response to Elizabeth’s blessing that Mary sings her prayer.
Listen to her words of Joy!

(Lisa Ponczoch sings the first part of the Magnificat)

Our theme for this 4th advent service is “Magnifying the Lord”. As we have just heard Lisa sing, Mary says, “My soul *magnifies* the Lord”. Some translations read, “My soul *exalts* the Lord” or “My soul *glorifies* the Lord.” But when we look at the Greek text of this word, we find that the literal meaning of this word signifies the idea, “to make large, to make great, or to magnify”.

I have been intrigued by Mary’s use of this word “magnify” in her song of praise to God. Why would Mary say that her heart or her soul *magnifies* the Lord?

I want us to think about the word “magnify” for a moment. We all know what it means to “magnify” something, don’t we! I remember the first time my parents bought a magnifying glass for my brothers and me. It was so much fun to “blow up” the image of the things that we were accustomed to look at. Of course, when you turn four young boys loose with a magnifying glass, then they will end up magnifying things that were probably never meant

to be magnified. It's amazing what an armpit or a nostril can look like under a magnifying glass. And who would have guessed that an ant in the sun would really blow up!! The amazing thing is that when we magnify something, it takes on a shape and a form that is rather surprising. It is incredible to look at things, not only from the perspective of a "wide angle" or distant view, but also from a blown up, magnified view!

As I have thought about Mary's prayer and her selection of the word "magnify," I can't help but think that Mary had discovered one of the amazing truths about God's way of doing things.

As we have already seen, Mary did not break forth in song when Gabriel revealed to her God's plan that she would give birth to the "Son of the Most High". With humble acceptance, she simply proclaims, "May it be to me as you have said". But when she ran to Elizabeth and received Elizabeth's blessing instead of rejection or blame, Mary realized the incredible nature of God's plan. God not only had a plan on a "larger scale" for Mary's birth of the Son of God, but God's plan also included the confirmation and encouragement of Mary on the "smaller" scale of her own life through her relative Elizabeth.

I guess this is what I want for us to realize today as we think about Mary's song of praise. God's plan is perfect. I don't think that many of us would argue against the idea that God's plan is perfect. But what we sometimes don't realize is that the perfection of God's plan does not only

embrace the bigger picture of the “grand scheme of things”, but God’s perfect plan also includes the “smaller scheme of things” within the individual lives of his followers. If we were to magnify the details of God’s greatest plans, we will discover that his plans are perfect in both the big details and in the small details, if we will only be faithful and obedient to him.

If we will exercise our eyes of faith, we will be able to see this principle along with Mary.

For you see, this seems to be a principle of the way that God does things. When we examine God’s plan for our lives, if we will be obedient and faithful, we will ultimately be able to discern God’s perfect orchestration of that plan, even when it is not immediately apparent. And the incredible thing is that we will discover not only that the “bigger” plan is perfect, but even the smaller, more intricate details of the plan are perfect. In other words, we can literally *magnify* God’s plan, and his careful orchestration will become even more visible.

I want to show you several examples of how this works.

We have already looked at Mary.

After Gabriel shared his incredible news to Mary, she hurriedly flees her hometown and visits her older relative Elizabeth. Can you imagine the concern and anxiety that Mary must have felt? How would she ever be able to convince her relative Elizabeth that she was pregnant without ever having had sexual

relations with a man?! But even as Mary voices the first words of her greeting to Elizabeth, Elizabeth rises up and proclaims, “Blessed are you, Mary, among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! You are blessed because you have believed that the Lord will accomplish what he has said!” Mary didn’t have to explain her miracle to Elizabeth at all! Instead of receiving suspicion and perhaps rejection from Elizabeth, Mary became the recipient of humanity’s highest praise! Elizabeth actually blessed her!

At the hearing of Elizabeth’s blessing, Mary realized that God had not only devised a plan for the big events of her life, but God had planned the small things in her life as well! God had planned for the Savior of the world to be born to Mary, but He had also planned for a relative by the name of Elizabeth to bestow understanding and blessings upon the obediently anxious and fearful Mary. God’s plan included not only the blessing of all humanity, but also the blessing of Mary herself: one single solitary woman. And so Mary burst out in song, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!” Praise God for his marvelous plan!

I suppose the reason why this is so noticeable to us is because we are not always so good at the laying out of our own plans, are we? Sometimes we will have what seems to be such a great idea, but when we actually put that plan into action, all the details seem to scatter into complete disaster.

You have probably heard the story, but I am reminded of a story I heard a couple years ago.

A guy from Michigan bought a brand-new \$30,000 Jeep Grand Cherokee for Christmas. He decided to take his Jeep for a test drive on a duck hunting expedition with four of his buddies. And so they loaded up the Jeep with the dog, the guns, and the decoys, and they headed out to a nearby lake.

Now, it was the dead of winter, and of course the lake was frozen, so they needed to make a hole in the ice to create a natural landing area for the ducks and decoys. In Michigan it is not uncommon to drive your vehicle out onto the frozen lake. And although it is illegal, it is also fairly common to make a hole in the ice using dynamite. Well, one of these five buddies worked for a construction team, and he just happened to have brought some dynamite along. The stick had a short 20-second fuse.

And so the group was all set up. Their shotguns were loaded with duck pellets, and they had their decoys, warm clothes and a hunting dog. The first thing they had to consider, though, was how to safely dynamite a hole through the ice. They didn't want the dynamite to explode too close to where they were standing. And they also decided that they did not want to risk slipping on the ice when running away from a burning fuse. So they eventually settled on a plan to light the fuse and throw the dynamite out onto the ice.

And so the owner of the new Jeep walked about 20 feet further out onto the ice and held the stick of dynamite at the ready while one of his companions lit the fuse. As soon as he heard the fuse sizzle, he hurled it across the ice as far as he could he ran in the other direction.

Well, this is where the “great plan” of these 5 geniuses began to run amuck. Remember a moment ago when I mentioned the vehicle, the decoys, the guns and the dog? Let me tell you about this dog. This dog was a trained Black Labrador, born and bred for retrieving, especially retrieving things thrown by his owner. As soon as the stick of dynamite left this man’s hand, the dog sprinted across the ice, chasing the stick-shaped piece of dynamite.

You can imagine how frantic these five guys became, as they immediately began yelling and hollering at the dog, trying to get him to stop chasing the dynamite. But their cries fell on deaf ears. Before you know it, the retriever was headed back to his owner, proudly carrying the stick of dynamite with the burning 20-second fuse. The group continued to yell and wave their arms while the happy dog trotted towards them. Well, what do you do? In a moment of what would seem to be great inspiration (which was born out of sheer panic, of course!) the master of the dog grabbed his shotgun and fired at his own dog.

The gun was only loaded with duck shot, and so the shot actually confused the dog more than it hurt him. Bewildered, the dog continued trotting

towards his master, who shot at man's best friend yet again. Well, this time the dog was scared, and so he ran for cover with his tail between his legs. Looking around for cover, the dog ran for the nearest cover that he could find.....right underneath his owner's brand-new \$30,000 Jeep Grand Cherokee.

Ka-boom! The dog and the Jeep were blown to bits, and they sunk to the bottom of the lake, leaving a large ice hole in their wake. Needless to say, the insurance company determined that sinking a vehicle in a lake by illegal use of explosives was not covered under their policy, and the owner is still making \$400 monthly payments on his brand-new Jeep Grand Cherokee at the bottom of the lake.

This is exactly what happens so many times with our own "great plans", isn't it? How many times do our "best-laid plans" collapse into catastrophe? Or how many times do we have a "general plan", whose purpose and goal seem so beneficiary, and yet the details of that plan, or the way that we try to accomplish that plan, leaves a painful trail of hurt and pain in its wake?

Not so with God! God's plans are perfect in the greater scope of things, and His plans are even perfect in the smaller scope of things. Perhaps Mary realized this truth about God's plans, and this is the reason why she sang, "My soul *magnifies* the Lord." Even when God's plans are magnified down to their tiniest elements, his plans are proven to be beautiful and perfect.

But do you know what is really exciting about this characteristic of God's plan? The exciting thing is that, with eyes of faith, we can see this same truth all throughout the story of Jesus! When we magnify the plan of God so that the smallest of details become visible, we can STILL see the intricate planning of God at work.

Let me give you some examples.

At the birth of His only begotten Son, God proclaimed the good news of the Savior's birth through the singing of an angel choir. These angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to the people on whom God's favor rests." The angels proclaimed God's plan to bring salvation and a Savior to the entire world. But this plan also included the great joy and salvation of the shepherds who were watching their flocks in the fields nearby. God's "big plan" was to bring the news of a Savior, which was "good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10). But that same plan encompassed even a handful of lowly shepherds, to whom the angels declared, "Today in the city of David a Savior has been born *to you!*" (Luke 2:11).

God's plan is not only perfect within the "big picture" of things, but it is also perfect in the smallest details. "My soul magnifies the Lord".

We find the same principle at work in Jesus' life. Think of the story of the healing of Jairus' daughter that we read about in Luke chapter 8. Jairus was the ruler of the synagogue. He was a well-known and recognizable man within

his community. You know the story: Jesus comes to his house and finds Jairus' daughter already dead from her sickness. But he speaks the divine words, "My child, get up!", and she is raised from the dead. This story reveals such a wonderful and beautiful plan of God's power and victory over death. But even in the journey to Jairus' house, we see that God's plan doesn't only account for the great event of the resurrection of this young girl from the dead, but God's plan also accounts for the healing of the poor, hopeless woman along the way, so that she also gains a new life that is free from a bleeding that had plagued her for 12 years! My soul magnifies the Lord!

We find this characteristic of God's perfect planning even to the smallest details not only in the LIFE of Jesus, but even in the DEATH of Jesus. Even as Jesus is suffering on the Cross, dying for the sins of all humanity (there's the "great plan" of God, right?), Luke tells us that Jesus looks to the repentant criminal at his side and says, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." God's great plan did not only take into account the salvation of ALL repentant and believing men and women of the world, but his plan also took into account the salvation of one murderous, undeserving, *yet repentant*, criminal on a cross next to Jesus. My soul magnifies the Lord!

The pages of the Bible are filled with stories that demonstrate the perfection of God's plan both in the large scope of things and also in the

smallest scope of things. But this is not only true of the stories of the Bible; this is true of God's plan for *our lives*, too!

When I was finishing up my doctoral dissertation at the University of Leiden in Holland, I was invited to teach for a year at the European Nazarene Bible College, which is located right on the border between Germany and Switzerland. For me personally, this was a wonderful opportunity. Not only would this opportunity provide me with some much needed teaching experience, but it would also provide me with an inroad into Nazarene higher education. As my wife Mieke and I prayed about this, the Lord seemed to confirm to us that this was something that he wanted us to do. This plan of God seemed to fit perfectly for me and my personal desire to teach in one of our Nazarene institutions of higher learning. But there was a problem. My wife and I have four children. We had lived in Holland with our children for 9 years at this time. Although we were planning to return to the United States after I finished the year at the European Nazarene College, our children couldn't read, write, or even hardly speak English at all. How could we take them to a small village in Switzerland, and have them be enrolled in Swiss German schools? I speak German, but I don't speak *Swiss* German! While the move to Switzerland to teach at the Nazarene college seemed to be the best possible situation for me personally from an academic standpoint, it seemed to be the worst possible situation for our 4 children. And yet God made it clear

to us that this is what he wanted us to do. With anxious and fearful hearts, we decided to move to Switzerland in obedience to what God had called us to do. At the Bible college in Switzerland, there was a man and woman by the name of Phil and June Petrie who had come to Switzerland from America to help at the Bible college. Phil had worked for years at Mount Vernon Nazarene University, and so he quickly took over the task of Registrar at the college. But June really didn't seem to have a special task to perform at all. All that she had done for the past 25 years was to teach elementary school in America. While my wife and I had no idea how we were going to take care of our children in a small village in Switzerland, God's plan had already arranged for our children to have their own private English school teacher with more than 25 years of experience! God doesn't only take care of the "big details" within his plan; he also takes care of the smallest details! My soul magnifies the Lord!

During this special time of Advent, I want to remind you of God's plan for your life. So many of you have left everything behind to come to Colorado Springs. And you came in order to obey God's call and plan for your life in ministry. For most of you, God's plan seemed so clear to you as you came here. And so you stepped out on faith to obey this "great plan" of preparing for ministry. But now the struggles have come: classes are difficult, the adjustments for you or for your spouse or children have been very trying, your salary doesn't seem to cover all your bills, the church you are attending seems

to be nothing like the church that you came from back home. And so the plan of God seems to be hanging from the thinnest of threads. As you made the preparations to come here, the “big picture” of God’s plan looked so great, but now as you are dealing with the smallest details of that plan, the doubt has crept into your mind that perhaps God has overlooked the small, but important details of YOUR life.

Today, the young virgin, yet pregnant, Mary has a song for us. It is a song that was composed under the most trying of difficulties. And yet it is a song that speaks of a God whose plan is perfect, even when we do not yet realize it. In faithful obedience to God’s plan, Mary said to God’s messenger, “May it be to me as you have said.” And as a result of that obedience and faithfulness, a Savior, Christ the Lord, was born! And the perfect plan of God was revealed not only to ALL mankind, but also to Mary in an unexpected blessing.

In the midst of your struggles, in the midst of your anxiety and your difficulty to understand the intricate details of God’s plan for your life, the song of Mary calls us to a life of obedience and faithfulness. God’s plan is perfect! My soul magnifies the Lord!

Amen