

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Micah 5:2-5a
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-45

Most of you have lived in Texas long enough to have ridden in a pickup truck. When you sit on the passenger's side, you often find a small, rearview mirror mounted just outside your door. It is normally adjusted so the driver can see behind the truck. It's a special mirror that gives a panoramic view of everything in back. Now if you look very closely at the mirror, you can usually see some words etched in the glass near the bottom—words you can barely read. The words say, "Warning: Objects reflected in this mirror may be larger than they appear to be."

I don't know who is supposed to be reading those words. The passenger doesn't really need to know, and the driver would have to lean all the way across the front seat and stare at the mirror for a minute or two in order to read them. And, of course, by that time the truck probably would have already gone off the highway anyhow.

Still, the warning intrigues me, because it sets me thinking about how our perception of life is often distorted the same way the warning says the view in the mirror is. There are some things in life that *are* a lot larger than we picture them to be. Sometimes there are dangers much closer than we are aware, and sometimes there are wonderful gifts quite near at hand even though we think they are far from us. The rearview mirror on the truck is like a reverse magnifying glass. It makes what we have passed look small. And it doesn't tell us at all what lies ahead.

In today's Gospel Mary sings a song about magnification. A couple of months earlier Mary had been told by the angel of the Lord that she would bear the Son of God. Startling as that news was, Mary didn't have to face the social consequences of being unwed and pregnant until her pregnancy began to show. But when it did, she probably decided it might be nice to go visit her cousin Elizabeth in the hill country for a while. Hill country folk don't usually have close neighbors, and besides, they understand things better when you're in the sort of situation Mary was in.

Now Mary wasn't expecting the welcome she got when Elizabeth saw her. Mary didn't even get a chance to explain what had happened. Elizabeth simply greeted her with loud words of blessing and congratulations. Elizabeth not only understood. Elizabeth accepted Mary and in fact thought her pregnancy was wonderful. And so Mary had no reason to present excuses or explanations or rationalizations for the state she was in. Elizabeth didn't frown at her or shame her or make jokes about her. She simply embraced her with joy and exuberance.

Mary was overwhelmed by it all. And so she sang a song that began, "My soul magnifies the Lord." The song is called the Magnificat. It is only ten verses long in the Bible, but many lengthy books have been written about it. The words are striking and bear repeated reflection. The Magnificat is part of our liturgical service of worship called Vespers, or Evening Prayer. It is worth considerably more commentary than I can give (or that you will allow) in a single sermon. So I will confine my sermon today to a commentary on the first line of the Magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord."

The word for soul in Greek is *psyche*. Soul is not, however, the only thing that *psyche* means. *Psyche* can also be translated as self, or life. In no way does soul in this passage mean the tiny divine spark of God that is imprisoned in the physical flesh of a human being. Mary was not a neo-Platonist. She was a simple woman with a God-given flair for expressing herself in plain but poetic language. "My soul magnifies the Lord." That's one translation. Another one would be "My self magnifies the Lord." Still another would be, "My life magnifies the Lord." She is not here talking about some small part of herself, but about her total self. She is talking about her body, her mind, and her ego. It is who she is as a total human being that is magnifying the Lord. As a total person she is gathered up into the magnificent experience. Her whole life is involved in what is happening to her and through her.

Now let's look at the word "magnifies." The word in Greek means the same as the Latin word

“magnificat.” It means to make big, to enlarge. It is a good word for Mary to use, because it carries meaning on several levels. In the first place, Mary’s pregnancy is beginning to show because her uterus is getting bigger. Mary is experiencing physical enlargement, physical magnification, if you will. When she says that she is magnifying the Lord, she *means* it. She *feels* it. Her clothes are getting tight. Everybody can see that something’s making her bigger. This physical sense of the Magnificat is often overlooked by those who don’t take Mary’s pregnancy seriously.

But there is also another sense of magnification taking place. The Word of God is entering the world through Mary. Mary is the amplification of that Word, the sound system that conveys that Word to all of history. She magnifies the Word. Now magnifying something is not the same as producing it. A sound engineer may be able to record some beautiful words and music without ever being able to read or perform any of it. Mary doesn’t create the Word of God, which is Jesus the Christ. She amplifies it, magnifies it, conveys it for the sake of the world.

All of which brings us to the final point of this first line of the Magnificat: “the Lord.” Mary magnifies the *Lord*. She does not magnify herself. She does not magnify a religious system. She does not magnify holy scripture. She does not even magnify theology. She magnifies the Lord. It is the Lord who came to her without invitation on her part. It is the Lord who is doing great things in and through her. It is the Lord who scatters the proud and exalts the lowly, who fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty. It is the Lord whom Mary magnifies in her pregnancy and in her life. It is the Lord who is the source and the destiny of her selfhood at this moment in her life.

Protestants in general, and Lutherans in particular, in their efforts to chastise Roman Catholics for their sometimes undue and excessive devotion to Mary instead of to God, have often erred by rejecting Mary altogether. Lutherans forget that Luther himself called Mary “the Mother of God.” He frequently honored her for her genuine humility and steadfastness amidst embarrassment and scorn.

Mary’s song about magnifying the Lord is also our song as the church. Just as Mary was chosen to bear the Word of God to the world, so also the church is commissioned to keep bearing that same Word to every nation and every people in every time and in every place. Mary in all of her blessedness is just as surely a role model for the church as is Peter or James or John. Mary’s pregnancy is the church’s pregnancy: we are expected to deliver that Word in every generation.

The Lord is magnified in and through our life when the Word is born into stables where displaced persons seek refuge from social or political rejection. The Lord is magnified by us when his Word is borne to shepherds in the fields and janitors in boiler rooms and cleaning women in lonely office buildings late at night. The Lord is magnified by us when his Word is born to AIDS patients and the elderly and little children lost in the midst of family fights. The Lord is magnified by us when the rejected are accepted, the blind are made to see, and the lost are found and called by name.

The rearview mirror on the truck makes the past smaller, and then it must have a printed warning that it has done so. But Mary and the Church magnify the Lord in such a way that the past can be seen exactly the way it was because the Lord receives the past and declares it approved.

On the other hand, the rearview mirror on the truck tells us nothing of what lies ahead. But Mary and the Church bear the Word of God boldly into the future, knowing that the One who absolves our past also declares our future open, regardless of what lies around the next bend in the road of life.

When Mary sang the Magnificat, all fear was put aside, so great was her joy over what God was doing. So also we are free to put our fear aside and sing without reservation the song of Mary, the song of all of those throughout the ages who have dared to be pregnant with the Word of God.

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