

O Come Magnify the Lord With Me
Luke 1:46b-55
December 20, 2009

This Friday had to have been one of the dreariest days on record – windy, cold, rainy, foggy. And in the midst of that I drove to Decatur to see Dr. Silverman who has been my ophthalmologist for over 30 years. He'll retire soon, and then I'll find someone closer to home, but I figure – once a year, or once every other year, I can make the 50 mile drive to have my vision checked by a trusted physician and friend. My glasses are a necessity – I can't see anything up close without them – words on a page blur, my arms aren't long enough any more to hold pages far enough away for me to make out what's written anymore. My glasses are the first thing I put on when I wake up, and the last thing I take off at night. They magnify things sufficiently enough so that I can see clearly and navigate my way in the world. Without them, I would be lost, in a perennial fog.

That drive to Dr. Silverman's office gave me the chance to mull over the scripture reading for today. There is, I discovered, so much in Mary's song to reflect on. As I headed out Highway 78 towards Monroe, the content of her song attracted me. It is more of a battle cry than a lullaby! It tells of the mighty being over thrown, the weak being lifted up, the hungry being fed, and those who think they have it made, surprised by the overturn of their power and control, being sent away empty-handed. It is a powerful message of hope to the oppressed, the poor, and the hurting in our world. But, on the other hand, it contains a warning for those of who at this moment are comfortable, have many of life's luxuries, and feel pretty much in control of our lives and our destinies.

The newspaper Friday morning contained a striking contrast of elements – first there were colorful advertising inserts for department stores, hawking their wares because this is make it or break it time for retailers, and it's almost our patriotic duty now to go out and shop 'til we drop to get those bargains and keep the stores open and do our part to turn the economy around. Then, there was a separate section of letters to Santa Claus from children – apparently the X-Box is still a favorite on most kids' wish lists, along with lap top computers. Reading the letters, frankly, was a bit disheartening – after the obligatory – Hi Santa, how are you and Rudolph; I've been really good this year – most of the kids got down to business – Here's my list – I want, I want, I want and mostly they wanted for themselves, not so much for mom and dad or brothers and sisters, or friends. And then, finally, tucked away on the back pages of the newspaper were the foreclosures – several pages of homes to be auctioned because the owners had fallen behind in their mortgage payments. And I wondered about the families who, in the midst of all the push to buy, to acquire, to possess, were losing their homes. No room at the inn for them. There's a sermon there, I thought.

But, about the time I reached Walnut Grove, my thoughts turned to the amazing fact that Mary was actually singing. What in the world could cause a pregnant, unmarried, teenager – maybe 14 years old – to sing? Mary lived in a small town where everyone knew everyone's business. Her parents aren't mentioned; maybe they're too embarrassed. Her fiancé Joseph, had suspicions about her. She leaves the little town and goes to spend some time with her older cousin Elizabeth, perhaps to get away from the gossip that's swirling around her. Mary's family wasn't rich or powerful, perhaps they lived a bit above the poverty level, but not much. She's surrounded by scandal and nosey neighbors; her country is occupied by Roman soldiers. Her life is a mess. What has she got to sing about? Everything that could go wrong has – except for a bit later when she gives birth to this child far from home and in a stable, surrounded by animals and without the presence of a midwife or her mother. And yet she sings.

It is easy enough to sing about the greatness of God when everything is going well. But how many of us are able to sing when we hit rough times? How many of us even remember how to sing? In difficult times, laughter stops, singing stops; we tend to speak in a monotone and briefly, if we speak at all. Sighing takes the place of singing. It is almost too painful to speak, we are wordless, mute. And the silence of our voices is perhaps a reflection of the silence in our lives that we fear is the absence of God. And we ask those scary questions: Where is God? Why is this happening to me?

It is at times like this that community is important. Just as Mary sought out the comfort and companionship of her cousin Elizabeth, so too we need each other more than ever during difficult times – because that’s when we sing for each other. When one of us is mute because of the burdens we bear, the rest of us keep the melody alive in our hearts until our voices can join the chorus again. And, perhaps in these times of incredible stress and feelings of aloneness, we can remind each other that Mary herself, stressed beyond belief, breaks into song. Perhaps we can remember together that a bit later angels sing in the night sky while a baby cries in a stable. And maybe we can grab on to the hope of the Christmas message. The future is not closed; it won’t always be this way; God is faithful to God’s promises; there is always the possibility of new beginnings, of something beautiful being born out of what seems to be the rubble of our lives. And maybe then we all can sing – just a little bit – or at least hum along! That, I thought, probably had the makings of a pretty good sermon.

But, on my way back from Decatur, driving through the rain with my eyes still dilated and everything just a little bit fuzzy, I found myself drawn to the beginning of Mary’s song. Maybe it’s because I had just seen the eye doctor and clear vision was really important in that storm – who knows – but I kept hearing those first few words. “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Magnify – magnification – sure, I need magnification in my eyes to be able to see clearly. But what does it mean for my soul to magnify the Lord? Magnify, according to my dictionary, means to enlarge, to amplify, to make greater or more intense or more important. Mary’s song is a prayer – and in that prayer she glorifies God, proclaims the importance of God in her life, expresses her confidence in God, and sets all of the events of life within the framework of God’s overarching plan and will. God is the one in whom Mary lives, and moves, and has her being – the most important, the largest, the most significant element of her life. Her groundedness in God is what keeps her going, allows her to sing when all the world around her seems chaotic, confusing, and hostile.

We have a prayer group in this church, and anyone is welcome to come on Wednesday evenings at 5 pm. It’s kind of a wild and crazy bunch – not your stereotypical, up tight, humorless, incredibly serious church folks – we laugh a lot – as we share our joys. We cry sometimes in recounting our concerns. Like Mary in her Magnificat, which this passage is traditionally called, we celebrate when the lowly have been lifted up; when the hungry have been fed; when the homeless have been housed; when the sick have been healed. We mourn together when those things have not taken place; when we remember a sick friend not getting better, a child without food or housing; a friend for whom justice has been denied. And then after putting it all out on the table, we pray. Our souls magnify the Lord. The act of praying is an act of trust, a belief that there is a God who hears and who responds and who cares. And as we pray, we are reminded of and encouraged about the world of God’s promises that are in the process of being fulfilled. Our prayers enlarge our imaginations and make us joyful and hopeful about what has been and what is yet to come. As we magnify God, so our faith is magnified.

Jesus, whose birth we celebrate this week, shows us in his life what the full magnification of God looks like. He is the one in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and all of his actions, all of his words reflected that fully magnified God within. Everything he did and said

was tested against that image. Every prayer he offered was focused on that central, abiding presence.

Eugene Peterson says that prayer is our way of being attentively present to God.¹ Growing in attentiveness to the presence of God in our lives is what the journey of faith is all about. So what might happen, I began to wonder, in the year to come, if we chose to magnify God, if we chose to enlarge and amplify our efforts to become attentively present to God? To center ourselves and focus ourselves on God. Beyond Sunday mornings here together, beyond Wednesday evenings in our prayer group, what might happen if we become increasingly aware of this One in whom we, like Mary, live and move, and have our being, so that every breath we take becomes, in some sense, a prayer, a communication with God who creates, redeems, and sustains us in every moment? Like my glasses that are so necessary to my life, can we magnify God enough to see clearly and to navigate our way in the world? For, truly, without God we are lost in a fog much greater than last Friday's.

Well, with that thought on my mind, I pulled into my garage, home safe and sound from a couple of tense hours of driving in the rain, and meditating on Mary's song. And, as I turned off the ignition, and breathed a prayer of relief, that line from our Psalter passed through my mind – "O come, magnify the Lord with me." – and I decided, yes, that's it – that definitely will preach. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rev. Lisa Caine
Oconee Street UMC
Athens, Georgia

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Conversations: The Message Bible with its Translator* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2007), 1579-1580.