

Sermon: My Soul Magnifies the Lord

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Dec. 21, 2025)

How was it that a simple, uneducated peasant girl could sing a song of God that is beautiful, awe inspiring, and profoundly revolutionary? I am speaking of Mary's Magnificat sung by Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus, with the Latin title 'magnificat', translated as 'to magnify', as in Luke 1:46, "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.*"

In Luke's gospel, the introduction to the birth of both John the Baptist and Jesus is told largely through the experience of women—Elizabeth, John's mother, and Mary, Jesus' mother. For both women, their conception of their first child is foretold by angelic messengers and accomplished by the power of God, and the sons they bear bring God's kingdom to realization in the world.

When Mary heard the announcement by the angel Gabriel about her own coming child, and then visited her relative Elizabeth, she sang a psalm of praise that celebrated God's power in remembering the humble, as we read in Luke 1:46-49:

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name."*

So we sing in Hymn 123, verse 1:

My soul gives glory to my God. My heart pours out its praise.
God lifted up my lowliness in many marvellous ways.

But Mary did not stop at her personal elevation, she went on to praise God for confronting the powerful and arrogant, and lifting up the poor and hungry. As we read in Luke 1: 51-53

*"He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination 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."*

So we sing in verse 4 of Hymn 123:

Love casts the mighty from their thrones, promotes the insecure,
leaves hungry spirits satisfied; the rich seem suddenly poor.

But Mary was not the first Jewish woman to sing praise to God. The story of a woman's song in response to God's gracious gifts is an old tradition for the people of Israel, with roots all the way back to the book of First Samuel, which happens to be the current focus of our weekly Friday bible study, at noon, via Teleconference.

When the people of God were first living in the land promised to them, and organizing their institutions of kingship and worship. A power prophet, Samuel, emerged to guide these important transitions. Samuel's mother, Hanna, had been barren but God's gift of a son who would become this great prophet caused her to sing a song of praise for God. So we read in 1 Samuel 2:1-2:

*"My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies
because I rejoice in your victory.
There is no Holy One like the Lord,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God."*

And in verse 5 of the same passage:

*"Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.
The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn."*

And again in verse 7-8:

*"The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low; he also exalts.
He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor."*

Do you hear the echo of Mary's Magnificat in Hannah's song? The love of God is expressed and experienced, not just in hearing cries of despair, nor simply making barren wombs fertile, but in overturning injustice and reversing the worldly order. So we sing in verse 3 of Hymn 123,

From age to age to all who fear, such mercy love imparts,
dispensing justice far and near, dismissing selfish hearts.

Hannah may have been the first woman to experience and praise God in such a way, but she is certainly not alone. Deborah, the judge and prophetess, had recounted the heroic story of Jael in a song, as recorded in the Book of Judges chapter 5. Jael was the wife of Heber the Kenite, who invited Sisera into her tent. At that time, Sisera was the commander of the army under King Jabin of Canaan, who had greatly oppressed the Israelites.

During a decisive battle where Sisera's army was routed, he took shelter in Jael's tent. He asked for water, she gave him milk, then fed him and covered him with a rug. So when the commander let down his guard and closed his eyes, Jael took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and drove it into his temple, until it went down into the ground. For that cunning and courageous act, of swiftly dispatching an arch-enemy of the Israelites, Prophetess Deborah lauded Jael in her song, twice calling her as "*most blessed of women*" (Judges 5:24). Do you hear another echo of Mary's song?

This echoing doesn't stop there. Let us now turn to Judith. The Book of Judith in the Apocrypha tells the story of a Jewish widow, who used her beauty and charm to save her hometown Bethulia from an imminent invasion by the Assyrians. She did so by going into the camp of the enemy general, Holofernes, with whom she slowly gained his trust. So in one night, as Assyrian general lied in a drunken stupor, Judith decapitated him, and took his head back to her fearful countrymen.

The story, the context and its setting is ahistorical, closer to a theological novel. One interesting note about the fictional town of Bethulia lies in its name, which literally means Yahweh's virgin. Another interesting note about this story lies in how Judith was praised, in chapter 13 of the book, "*O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God, who created the heavens and the earth, who has guided you to cut off the head of the leader of our enemies.*" Do you hear yet another echo to Mary?

And it doesn't stop there. If one takes a closer look at the genealogy of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. One will find the names of four women, of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, stitched into this genealogy. Four strong women, outsiders yet foremothers of Jesus, whose stories echo and resonate with the song of Mary.

It is as if when Elizebeth welcomed Mary into her room, she inadvertently invited all these strong, feisty and powerful women into a most unusual communion across time and space. And together, they composed and sang the

Magnificat through the voice of Mary: “*My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.*”

The status quo has no place in God’s economy of grace. When God decisively moves into the life of the world, nothing is ever the same. The former ordering of life is displaced, a newer ordering of life has emerged. The old has gone, the new has come, and hallelujah, praised be God.

This language of revolution, this overturning of the status quo has power beyond its mere words. Lives have been changed, societies transformed, and in some cases governments brought down. In this century alone, at least three different governments had attempted, unsuccessfully, to ban the public recitation of Mary’s Magnificat—during the British’s rule of India, the military junta of Argentina in the 1970’s, and Guatemala’s government in the 1980’s. People on the margin, particularly in the three above cited examples, have one thing in common, they have all believed that God hears, God cares, and God acts to liberate.

The German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized the empowering nature of Mary’s song. In his sermon during the 1933 Advent, Bonhoeffer said, “The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings...This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.”

What does all these mean for us here today, as we gather in the season of Advent, in anticipation of the coming of Jesus Christ. For one, I no longer see Mary as meek and mild. She is so much more complex than what we make her out to be. No she did not kill in order to save. Her revolution lies in her humility, in that she humbled herself before God, and out of her own freewill, she submitted to God’s will.

But, isn’t that what love is? Love in the sense of Agape—love that is expressed in the act of self-sacrifice. So we sing with the final verse of Hymn 123,

Praise God, whose loving covenant supports those in distress, remembering past promises with present faithfulness.

And it is by such covenantal love, that will one day take both the child and the mother to the cross. And it is by such love, that the old world order of ‘might makes right’ is finally, irreversibly shattered.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**