

“The Best Prayers in the Bible” (Part 2)

Luke 1.46-55

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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Last week I asked you all to give me some input on what *you* think are the very best prayers in the Bible, and I’ve been appreciating the responses I’ve been receiving. One of the prayers that was suggested to me was one that I was already thinking about, namely, this prayer offered by Mary, the mother of Jesus, while she was pregnant with him. I want to give you a big-picture look at this prayer, and I also want to give you a close-up view. Let’s start with the big picture.

Where we are in the story is that the angel Gabriel visited Mary and told her she was going to give birth to the Son of God. “He will be great,” Gabriel had said; “and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Gabriel had also told Mary that her cousin Elizabeth was also pregnant with a special child, who would become John the Baptist. Mary had offered herself freely to serve God’s will: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then Mary had gone to visit Elizabeth, and when she arrived, Elizabeth felt her unborn child leap for joy. “Blessed are you among women,” Elizabeth said to Mary, “and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Elizabeth rightly recognizes that Mary is “the mother of my Lord.” It is at that point that Mary offers this heartfelt prayer.

Consider this from Mary’s perspective. Young, engaged, not sexually active, yet pregnant; visited by an angel – as far as Mary knew, the last time *anybody* had been visited by an angel was *hundreds of years earlier* – then told that she would give birth to the Son of the Most High; then to have all of this *confirmed* by the way Elizabeth greeted her – you have to wonder what Mary would have been feeling. Surprise? Delight? Anxiety? Fear? These are not your average, ordinary, run-of-the-mill events in daily life. Mary knows that history is changing, and that she has a critical role to play. She has *accepted* this change to her life, willingly and gladly – though it was not something that she *sought out*.

That’s the way of it, isn’t it; when God asks you to do something; when he asks you to step up, play a role; there’s a job that needs to be done, and *you’re* the one he’s picked to do it. Reminds me of what happened to me, all those years ago; I had headed off for seminary after college, and I had said to God, “I’ll do anything you want, except I will *not* become a pastor.” I did what Jonah had done – God had told him to go to Ninevah, and Jonah had said “No way,” and eventually there came that moment when Jonah had to own up to the fact that he wasn’t going to get out of this. Neither was I. Mary didn’t protest; she was significantly less stubborn than Jonah and I were; she just simply said *okay*. *Let it be*.

So here she is, on Elizabeth's doorstep, great with child, great with *holy* child, the Savior of the World taking on human form inside her womb, and she prays: *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.* "Magnifies" the Lord – what does that mean? Does it mean she's looking at God through a magnifying glass? No, this is an archaic meaning of the word; some translations render it as "exalts" or "praises" or "glorifies"; literally, it means to "make great." In Greek, it is *megaluno*; think "mega"; think *big*. "My soul *magnifies* the Lord;" what she's doing is she's trying to tell everyone how *great* God is. A nice way to start a prayer, don't you think? "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised" – Psalm 48; Psalm 96; Psalm 145; 1 Chronicles 16; there are four different prayers in the Bible that include those words. How often do you take a moment, in your prayer life or in public, to declare how *great* God is? In our contemporary world, we'll often hear or say this: *God is good ... all the time.* But what the Bible says is richer than that. God's not just *good*. He's *great*. *Mega*. "My soul *magnifies* the Lord, and my spirit *rejoices* in God my Savior!" That's how Mary begins her prayer. God's not just *good*. God is *great*. And she wants the world to know it.

Why? "For he has looked with favor 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." This is a *personal* prayer that Mary is offering here. She knows, she senses, that her life is going to be *forever* different because of what God has done for her – a lowly peasant girl. She's taking it all in. Maybe she doesn't know that there are going to be celebrated pieces of art in her honor, grand cathedrals in her honor, but she *does* know that her life has been touched, *changed*, by the Almighty, in a dramatic, positive way. She is *thanking* God, but more than that, she is *honoring* God. She is rejoicing in how *great* God is.

But it's not *just* a personal prayer. She looks out into the world, she knows where there is suffering and injustice, and she *knows* that God is doing something about that. He's not just standing by idly while wicked people do wicked things. "He has shown strength with his arm; he 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." When? When did God do this? What is Mary looking at when she sees these things happening? She's looking at that unborn child in her womb. At the things that *he* is going to do and say. At the ways *he* is going to inspire people to follow him, serve him, turn from evil, do good, give up their desire for power and money and control, hand their lives over to God (the way *she* did), serve the poor, feed the hungry, *make this world a better place*. She states these things as if they are already an accomplished *fact*. God *has* scattered the proud; he *has* brought down the powerful; he *has* lifted up the lowly; he *has* filled the hungry; he *has* sent the rich away empty. They are accomplished facts *because Mary is great with child, great with HOLY child*. God's seed and hers, conjoined in an embryo, now a fetus, soon to become a baby, soon to become a man, soon to be endowed with the Spirit of the Living God, soon to be heralded as King of Kings, Lord of Lords, enthroned in the heavens, sitting on the right hand of God the Father Almighty – *it is an accomplished fact*, already done, already decreed in the heavenly realm, with those events unfolding in human time as she lives and as that baby grows. Mary sees eternity in her bosom; what *is* and *what will be*; and *what will be* is good. It is very, very good. No, not just good. It is *great*.

"He has helped his servant Israel," she continues; her homeland; her people; her family; "in remembrance of his mercy" – "the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting"; that's from

Psalm 103; what God is doing here with Mary, with Israel, is *so incredibly consistent* with all those great stories and songs her people have been telling and singing for generations. It is all, she says, “according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” She’s connecting the dots; *all of this*, from Abraham to that unborn baby in her womb, it’s all a manifestation of the *greatness* of God, the *mercy* of God. All that is *good* is because there is a *great* and *merciful* God.

It’s a song of praise, this prayer that Mary utters; praise to a *great* God, who does *great* things, whose *mercy* endures forever, who is *greatly* to be praised.

So, what do we *do* with this prayer? Sometimes we hear it, during the Advent season. Sometimes composers set it to beautiful music. But is that *all*? How can it be a model for us, today, of what *our* prayers could look like? Granted, none of us are Mary. None of us are likely to become enshrined in magnificent pieces of art or grand cathedrals. None of us have the privilege of bearing the Son of God into the world – or the despair of watching him suffer and die, as Mary did some thirty years later. We’re just ordinary folks, living ordinary lives, too busy, too stressed, pulled in too many different directions, trying to live a Christian life, sometimes *failing* to live a Christian life; sometimes ashamed of the things we have done and the ways we have let God down. We’re just ordinary folk ...

... kind of like the ordinary folk that Mary mentioned in her prayer. If we’re lowly, God lifts us up; if we’re hungry, God feeds us. If we’re too rich, too proud, too powerful – if we take the treasures God has given us and use them unwisely – God might need to say something to us, *do* something to us. But if we need help, God sends help; if we need saving, God offers us a Savior. God is *still* great. His mercy *still* endures. Mercy – Mary had said – “for those who fear him from generation to generation.”

What *mercy* have you received from God, lately? What *blessing* have you received, lately? What *great thing* has God done for *you*, lately? Have you noticed? Have you *recounted your blessings* recently? A few weeks ago, I gave you that prayer of Ignatius of Loyola. I know some of you have taken that home. Remember the first thing that Ignatius encourages us to do in that end-of-the-day prayer? The first step? “Give thanks to God our Lord for the benefits I have received from him.” Those are his words; his practical advice for how to begin an end-of-the-day prayer. *Start by giving thanks*. Take a moment, at the end of each day, when you’re preparing to fall into your evening slumber, and look back – *what happened*, that day, this day, that you are *thankful* for? What *blessing* did you receive? What do you need to *thank God* for? Maybe it’s just the beauty of the day, the bright blue sky, the crimson sunset. Maybe it was the gift you received from someone, the kind words, the offer of help. Yesterday I had a little accident on my bike; *five people* stopped to help me; numerous others *would* have stopped if I hadn’t already been surrounded. I thanked God for those people in my prayer last night. Sometimes we get so wrapped up in the daily stresses of life, all the things on our to-do list, all the things that *didn’t* go right today, that we don’t take the time to think about what *did*. Where have you experience the *greatness* and the *mercy* of God recently? Have you thanked him for it? Have you told him how *grateful* you are? How *appreciative*? How *great* you think he is, because he does things like that, *for you*?

“My soul *magnifies* the Lord, and my spirit *rejoices* in God my Savior...”

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