

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
December 18, 2011

1 Samuel 2:1b-10; Luke 1: 46b-55
"My Soul Magnifies the Lord"

"My soul magnifies the Lord" begins the famous Song of Mary or Cantic of Mary which is also called the *Magnificat* from the Latin to "magnify." More strictly: [My soul] magnifies.

It begins the gospel reading today. This is a wonderful song with amazing words. The opening line, "My soul magnifies the Lord," intrigues me. What is said here?

First: "*My soul...*" Simply, this is the deepest part of any human being. It's the true self. It's God in each of us. It's the essential human being and it's personal in that it's "*my soul.*"

"My soul *magnifies the Lord.*" God is within us and outside of us. My deepest and most profound self makes large the Lord. Basically, it expresses immense gratitude and deep appreciation for God and all that God means to us, does for us and gives to us. It's the fullest expression of one's relationship to God.

Why is Mary so full of her relationship with God? Why is God magnified so? We turn to the context of the statement which is the first chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. Therein one reads about the angel Gabriel promising children to Elizabeth, John's mother, and to Mary, Jesus' mother. Mary has just learned that she's pregnant and she dashes over to visit Elizabeth who is six months pregnant.

When Mary enters Elizabeth's home the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy. Elizabeth insightfully sees this as a visitation from God incarnate and tells Mary as much: "And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Mary is so overwhelmed and overcome with these experiences and these words and with expectation of what is to come that she exclaims in joyful and grateful tones her song, beginning with the line, "My soul magnifies the Lord..."

In doing this she places each of us in this very spot. We are where Mary is. It's the place of gratitude and joy; of appreciation and expectation. How so?

First, let us recall when we had an experience similar to that of Elizabeth and Mary. Suellen and I had such an experience. In our early marriage days we were invited by friends, Ken and Terri, to dinner. At the dinner they informed us that Terri was pregnant. We congratulated them little knowing that Suellen was pregnant. We found out the next

week and arranged to have another dinner with Terri and Ken. At that dinner we informed them that Suellen was pregnant and there was a spontaneous foursome happy hug in the kitchen. The conversation turned from academics to babies. We were ecstatic.

Our children are now grown and like Mary our souls still magnify the Lord in our relationship with them. Whenever we magnify the Lord we affirm health and wholeness of the relationship. When I am grateful for my children, in other words, when my soul magnifies the Lord in my relationship with them, they and I are honored. They are seen as children of God no matter what and that's the best we can do for them and ourselves.

Mary's song reminds us that Christmas is a time for our souls to magnify the Lord in all things. The song itself offers some of those things.

Mary sings: "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." Savior comes from the word "salve" to heal. Mary is healed because no matter how low she feels on the totem pole God favors her. God loves everyone, no matter what.

Mary sings: "God's mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." The Advent 2011 letter from the California Council of Churches opens with the words: "Jesus loved the entire 100%. But that love came with clear direction about the corrupting role of money and property in one's own spiritual well-being." Everyone can be corrupted but Mary knows and we know that God forgives us when we revere God in the way we live our lives.

Mary sings: "God 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. "The Council of Churches continues: "Jesus would have been for the 100% (the 99% + 1%, the 80% + 20% mentioned in the Occupy Wall Street movements today). All are equal before God."

The Council continues: "(We must) work together in a smart way to move our society closer to the Beloved Community where there are no rich or poor. In this Advent season, we are challenged to affirm the values that swirled around the first blessed birth. The messenger of peace, a tiny infant perceived as a threat to the powers of his time, challenged first royal leaders and governors and then all humankind, directing them to embrace new values."

Mary's final words: "God has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for ever." Our souls magnify the Lord when we like Mary look expectantly to the promised birth of Jesus. This celebrates anything that's born in us or that is new for us. Christmas is a time of renewal and trust that God is doing a good work in us and for us. We quit worrying about the past and we look forward to what God is doing and wants to do in us and the world.

When I was in my hometown Durban South Africa recently I looked up to the side of a tall building that used to display a huge circular neon Coca Cola sign that shut off, then came on and opened in circular motion until the whole sign shone and then went off and repeated the movement. I'm not a fan of Coca Cola but I liked the sign when I was a kid. I watched it many times from the beachfront at night and from the ocean when I was surfing before dark. Now it is gone. I missed that sign. But then, also in Durban one of the most magnificent soccer stadiums in the world was built during the Soccer World Cup in South Africa two years ago. You see it from all points of the beach and you drive right under it. I did every day I was there. It's an amazing sight. In life we lose some and we gain some.

Advent is not about regrets of losses from the past. It's about the new and beautiful in our lives symbolized by the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. The new covers the old. Our souls magnify the Lord in the new.

Incidentally, the Christmas Eve service will be carried by the Christmas story communicated in biblical text, song, music, dance and candle lighting, and the Christmas Day service will be a fun day of singing, prayer and storytelling thus this is the last sermon you will hear from me this year.

In closing, I want to affirm in the spirit of Mary how this church, the soul of this church, which is you all, have magnified the Lord in the many ways you have shared love and compassion in our community, education, ministry and mission. Jesus is born in us when we continue on the cutting edge and when we expect and engage in fresh and new ways of Christ's coming into our midst. We do that every day of the year. This is a lovely community.

May God bless us and give us the peace of the Prince of Peace in the remainder of this year and in the year to come. Amen.