

*The Magnificat for All Our Days*  
Luke 1.46-55

Happy Gaudete Sunday to you! What's that? Today is the third Sunday in Advent, the one Sunday in Advent with a special designation—Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is a Latin word meaning 'rejoice.' The reason to emphasize joy is because the day of the Lord's birth is fast approaching. Advent begins with themes of judgment and repentance, but this morning we hear a shift. We hear the joy of Mary's song this morning. Excitement builds as we anticipate the arrival of this holy day when Christ is born.

Gaudete Sunday is also named 'Rose Sunday.' It is the only day in the Advent season signified with a color other than purple. I grew up with Advent wreaths throughout my childhood, but I'm not sure anyone ever knew why one candle was pink instead of purple. I imagine the answer would have been, 'Because we always have a pink candle in our Advent wreath.'

The rose candle is a visual sign to *enjoy* the coming of the Lord. We've heard the call to watch and wait, stay awake and repent. Now we hear the call to rejoice. Waiting is still part of our Advent experience, but we rejoice that the end of our waiting draws near. /

There is no greater symbol of waiting with joyful expectation than the Virgin Mary. Today I'd like to meditate on the song that Mary sang after the Angel Gabriel announced she would bear the Son of God. Mary's song—the Magnificat—is beautiful in its simplicity, yet disguises a depth and mystery that begs further reflection. How does this song tell Mary's story, Israel's story, our story? Next week our Gospel lesson focuses on the Annunciation story, but we'll have a very different service, a combined service where the sermon is oriented for our younger worshippers. Today we consider the mystery and gift of Mary's Magnificat. /

In some ways, I fear we risk losing the treasure of Mary's song for our lives. I have never heard a sermon preached on the Magnificat and today could very well be the first sermon you've heard on the subject, too. Which is a stark contrast from the place of the Magnificat in our tradition. The Book of Common Prayer encourages us to meditate with Mary's Magnificat the whole year round, not just during Advent or Christmas. Every other day our Book of Common Prayer calls us to recite the Magnificat at Evening Prayer.

There's wisdom in this method of Scripture memorization. If you hear song lyrics enough, you'll memorize each chorus and verse whether you intend to or not. I can give a witness, too. Against my will, my daughter, Madeleine, has ensured that I would memorize the song 'Let It Go' from *Frozen*. Hear a song often enough and the words become ingrained on your mind. I still haven't seen the movie, but I know the gist of the story from the song. /

One of the most important features of the Magnificat is that we're carried into a story that transcends Mary's story. The first six lines magnify the Lord for the honor and dignity that God has bestowed on Mary. But the remaining *twelve* lines magnify the Lord for his faithfulness in Israel's past and his promised salvation happening in the present. There's more to explore here, but I'm getting ahead of myself. Before we meditate on the words and story of the Magnificat, we need to see them in light of Mary's own story. /

What intrigues me most about Mary's song is *when* she sings the Magnificat. Two events in Mary's life prompt her song. The first event, of course, is the visitation of the Angel Gabriel announcing the holy conception of God's son within her womb. Mary cannot conceive that she, a virgin, could conceive the Son of God. But she learns that the Holy Spirit will bring this miracle to pass. Mary responds with pure faith and trust, accepting God's will for her: 'let it be to me according to your word.' /

Luke tells us that after Gabriel's visitation, Mary moved quickly to see her relative, Elizabeth, also pregnant. The mysterious, joyful greeting between Mary and Elizabeth comprises the second event that prompted the Magnificat. When Mary greeted Elizabeth, Elizabeth's son in utero, John the Baptist, leapt with joy. Elizabeth cannot restrain her joy either, pouring out a word of blessing on Mary: 'Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.'<sup>1</sup> The sign of honor conferred by the Angel Gabriel; the word of blessing spoken by Elizabeth—these are the two moments that stir Mary's soul in praise and joy.

Holding these two moments together, we see the most important feature of her song—there is joy and freedom when Mary fully accepts God's divine will. She sings the glory of the Lord because accepting the will of God reveals the glory of God, not a burden. For Mary, she has a unique vocation in human history because she is the God-bearer, the Mother of God. We esteem her with great honor for this very reason. But

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1.45

she is also the forerunner of what it means to be a disciple of the Son she carried in her womb. Mary trusts the goodness of God's will and her trust produces profound joy. //

Not only is there joy in trusting his divine will, there is illumination for Mary. She sees and understands the work of the Lord in an entirely new way. She understands her life on a greater scale, but her illumination is much greater than her own life. The blessing of her obedience has cosmic dimensions. After all of Israel's failures, God's new creation of the world will yet come through Abraham's family. Mary sees that rulers and tyrants will be cast down. The widow, orphan, and stranger—the poor of the world—will be exalted by the faithfulness of God. The promises of God are neither forgotten nor lost. They are revealed to a peasant girl in ways that were unimaginable to Israel's best theologians. /

Mary's song is an amalgam of Israel's whole story. There are traces of Hannah's prayer here; there are phrases that sound like direct quotations of the Psalms and the Song of Moses. The Magnificat resembles the Beatitudes while the preacher of the Beatitudes grows in Mary's womb. But maybe the strongest connection with Mary's story is her relationship with Eve, the first mother. Just as Mary's son is the second Adam, the Church from its earliest days has seen Mary as a second Eve. Where Eve rebelled against the will of God, Mary trusts in the will of God. When Mary trusts the way of the Lord, she conceives the Son of God who will accomplish our redemption through his death and resurrection. Mary doesn't see each detail of the redemption story, but she rejoices in faith that the mercy of God would redeem her family from generation to generation. /

In a roundabout way, Mary's story reminds me of my favorite genre of fiction—detective fiction. I'm a nerd in many ways, but I'm especially a nerd about detective fiction. For my Advent reading plan this season, I'm reading the recently deceased crime novelist, P.D. James, and her mysteries in the Adam Dalgliesh series. I'm also reading W.H. Auden's *Christmas Oratorio* for a spiritual focus, but the P.D. James books are more fun. And she was a faithful Anglican, too, which makes me proud.

James was a masterful writer because she crafted her stories around the idea that life was a puzzle, that we live in a world of chaos where we're seeking order. But how we find order from the mess surprises us. Read a P.D. James novel and you'll be guessing whodunit til the very end. She introduces numerous characters and conflicts

until you are seemingly holding a half dozen or more loosely connected storylines. By the end of the story, James brings together all those loose strands and weaves them into one chord. You find yourself saying 'aha!' I see it now. It all connects. You find yourself marveling at the author. How did she do that? You learn that your imagination is still quite small. /

No one expected that all the strands of Israel's story would be woven together in the Virgin Mary and the Incarnate Son of God she carried. But the Magnificat weaves the numerous strands of God's promises saying, 'redemption is happening here—astonishingly—through the Child who this virgin girl carries in her womb.' /

But here's the truth about Mary's Magnificat. Even Mary couldn't see how each detail of her prophetic song would come true. The Magnificat issues from a joyful heart, but this same heart will know tremendous sorrow. It will be tremendously difficult to sustain the faith of which Mary sings. The very same promises that Mary professes in her song will be tested in very short order. And her faith will be tested throughout her life.

From the joyous heights of Gabriel's visitation and Elizabeth's blessing, Mary faces the very real threat of abandonment and rejection. Joseph enters a deep, dark night of doubt and temptation to leave Mary. We know how the story ends, but it could have gone the other way. It almost did. Joseph had resolved to divorce Mary until an angel visited him in a dream. What about Mary's faith before that night when God's angels visited Joseph? It is one thing to sing 'He who is mighty has done great things for me' when the Holy Spirit overshadows you with light; it is quite another to believe in the Mighty One in the dark night of faith. /

Or what about the arduous journey to Bethlehem and the rejection at the inn; the squalor of the stable; how could she still believe 'all generations will call her blessed' when not even one innkeeper seeing her condition would show her the mercy of warm shelter? /

Of course, Mary's birth pangs give way to joy on the night we will soon celebrate. But we often forget in our Christmas celebrations just how short-lived that moment of peace was for the holy family. Soon after our Lord's birth, Herod deployed a furious raid of all male children under the age of 2, seeking the life of Jesus. Protected by angels from Herod's rage, the holy family took flight into Egypt. In that flight to Egypt, how could Mary believe that God 'had put down the mighty from their thrones?'

Then there's that awkward moment at a wedding at Cana of Galilee, when Mary attends a wedding with her son at the beginning of his ministry. When wine runs out and she comes to her son with the crisis, Jesus mildly rebuked his mother. 'Woman, what has this to do with me? My hour has not come.' Mary tells the servants, 'do whatever he tells you.' Even though she doesn't know what's coming next, she has the same faith she practiced as a teenager. She still clings to her faith, 'he fills the hungry with good things.'

But then there's the more than awkward moment—a moment of public embarrassment—when dysfunction breaks out in Mary's family. After healing many, casting out demons, performing signs and wonders, Jesus returns home for a brief respite. What do his brothers and sisters do? They want an intervention because they believe Jesus has gone out of his mind. [Mark tells us his brothers want to seize him]. It's a difficult day to see 'the mercy of God being faithful from generation to generation.' Within one generation of one family, there is no mercy for the One who is Mercy Incarnate. /

Then, of course, we remember that darkest day when Jesus was shown no mercy at all. Mary was there at the cross, watching her Son suffer the most gruesome death imaginable. When he was a child, not many days removed from the first time she sang the Magnificat, Simeon told Mary that a sword would pierce her heart one day. And so it did at the cross. When the Son of God was lowered from the cross into Mary's arms, how could she believe that God had 'scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts?' Crucifixion is the epitome of man's *evil imagination*. How could she hold onto to that youthful hope that God had 'exalted the lowly?' How to rejoice and magnify the Lord on that day?

When God gives us the gift of joy, it doesn't mean that we will be exempt from suffering. When God illumines the heart with vision, it doesn't mean that we will never face the dark night of doubt again. Mary could not see the full road ahead, but Mary was no naive young girl. She is the greatest believer in the faithfulness of God. She sang the Lord's praise in her youth and she kept vigil in her grief. But you cannot hear the Magnificat in all its fullness until you hear it as an Easter hymn. At the empty tomb, God has shown the strength of his arm, God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. /

But I would go one step further and say the Magnificat sounds even more magnificent as an ascension hymn. Why? Because the same Luke who wrote of Mary's divine conception makes sure we know in the Book of Acts that Mary was present at her Son's ascension. The Ascension moves toward fulfillment of Mary's faith and joy. When the clouds come descending upon the Son of Man to lift him to the right hand of the Father, Mary knows the Lord exalts the lowly. As a teenager, Mary believed by faith in the mercy of God; as an aging mother, she sees Mercy enthroned in the ascended body of her Son. The Magnificat was the beginning of Mary's joy, but not its fulfillment. Gaudete Sunday begins our joy, but it doesn't complete it. Mary's joy was made complete when she was reunited with the God she bore within so many years ago. She could not have known what awaited her. She could not have imagined what she would see. But illumination and joy always follow the one who trusts the way of the Lord.

The promises of God that filled your heart with joy so long ago may have dimmed. Joy is not an emotion; joy is not one moment; joy is a Person. Magnify the Lord because He is faithful in ways that you can see, but even more so, in ways you cannot see. Your joy will be tested; your trust will be tested. You will know sorrows; you will know doubts. There is an illumination awaiting all of us that we cannot figure in our most daring imaginations. He has given us joy, but our joy will not be complete until we are united with Christ again. To receive that marvelous gift, each of us must say in our hearts, not just once, but throughout our lives—let it be to me according to your word.

In his Christmas Oratorio, W.H. Auden reimagines Gabriel's address to Mary, an address that comes to each of us. Auden writes, 'Child, it lies within your power of choosing to conceive the Child who chooses you.' / So choose Him who chooses you and conceive within your heart anew a joy unspeakable and full of glory. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.