

## THE MAGNIFICAT

LUKE 1:46-55

Pieter Brueghel was a 16<sup>th</sup> century Dutch painter. One of his paintings shown here is entitled The Census which portrays the census referenced in the Bible taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria. It happened just before Jesus' birth and was the reason Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem. Now the painting doesn't look very Mideastern, that's for sure, but that's not the point. It shows a lot of people in a long line waiting to be registered. You see lots of busy people and active commerce going on. At first glance you think this is just a painting of a crowd of people – until you look down in this part of the painting. There you notice a man pulling a donkey which is carrying a pregnant woman. Perhaps Brueghel's point is simply that it's easy to miss Mary and Joseph. You have to look hard because their part seems so insignificant and unimportant in relationship to everything else going on in this busy scene. And yet they were at the very center of this great, divine drama. Christmas is a bit like that, isn't it? So many people miss the real point and yet at Christmas they get so close.

This morning is the first Sunday of the Advent season – the time of year set aside by Christians the world over to reflect on the meaning of Jesus' birth. In the first two chapters of the Gospel according to Luke, we find four poems that were probably set to music and sung by the very first Christians as an expression of their faith. Over the years these poems have each been given a Latin name: the Magnificat, the Benedictus, the Gloria in Excelsis and the Nunc Dimittis. I'd like to explore with you something of the meaning of these four songs: the canticles of the Christ child.

Today, I want to consider the song attributed to Mary, the mother of Jesus. It's called the Magnificat which is based on the Latin word *magnifico* which means "magnify" or "to make great." An angel had appeared to Mary and told her that she would become pregnant with none other than the Messiah, the savior of the Jewish people. This pregnancy was to be supernatural in origin. Even though she was engaged to a man named Joseph, they hadn't slept together. Mary was a virgin at the time. God Himself took one of Mary's eggs and miraculously supplied the necessary male counterpart thus creating a human embryo in her womb. Now, people back then and there were no more willing to accept that kind of explanation for Mary's pregnancy than most folk here and now. Perhaps that's why Mary was sent off to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who lived some 80 miles away at that time. Elizabeth had also experienced a miraculous pregnancy. She and her husband were childless and well beyond child bearing years when God enabled her to become pregnant with a son who would grow up to be John the Baptist. Now when these two cousins met – Elizabeth and Mary – the Bible says that the baby inside Elizabeth began to move around in an excited, agitated way. At that moment, the Holy Spirit came upon Elizabeth and she spoke a word of prophecy concerning Mary's baby. Mary responded and her words are now referred to as the Magnificat. Let's read it just now. The Magnificat reminds me of at least three simple but important truths about Christmas that we should take to heart at the very beginning of this wonderful season. First of all:

**CHRISTMAS IS FOR THE ORDINARY PERSON.**

Have you noticed how much emphasis there is in our culture upon finding your self-worth? That could only be true if there exists a tremendous lack of self-worth among many people today. You and I live in a world that seeks to convey self-worth by equating it with certain criteria. Self-worth is often equated with success. In our culture, those two words or concepts are almost synonymous. If you become successful financially, you will have self-worth. If you become successful educationally, you will have self-worth. If you have successful relationships, you will have self-worth. But here's the problem with equating your self-worth with success. How do you define success? What's your definition of financial success? And then what happens if you have a financial reversal – you lose your job, you experience bankruptcy? Does that mean you lose your self-worth as a result? What's your definition of educational success? And if you run out of money before you get your degree or you don't get it from the "right" kind of school, what then? Are you worth less? What's your definition of relational success? And what happens when you go through a relational disaster – you experience divorce or a key friendship is terminated? Are you worth less now?

The Bible implies that a proper sense of self-worth depends on your relationship with God. In other words, your value is derived from God. It's not something you convey on yourself and it's not something other things – money, education, relationships – convey upon you either. If you lack a personal relationship with God this morning, it's no mystery why you struggle with feelings of worthiness. You're cut off from the source of your worth – God Himself. It is He that says you have value. It is He that says you have worth. It is He that says you have significance. So if, for whatever reason, you ignore God, or you have little use for God in your everyday life, or you try to find worth in other things besides God, it's inevitable that a sense of worthlessness will creep into your soul. This is why Jesus came at Christmas. You need a relationship with God. It's impossible to feel whole, complete, together or fully worthwhile without a vital and personal relationship with God made possible through Jesus.

"But, Rick, don't Christians sometimes struggle with feelings of low self-esteem? Can't a person who's put his or her faith in Jesus still question his or her self-worth?" Yes, sadly, that happens a lot. Why? Sometimes it's the result of a lot of emotional damage in a person's life. Sometimes it's the devil trying to defeat a person spiritually. And sometimes it's because you've bought into what our culture preaches to you everyday about self-worth – that it's a product of having stuff like money or possessions, or it's the result of achieving things in life, or it's when everyone in your family gets along, or it's when you don't have many problems in your life. Just because you've put your faith in Jesus for eternal life doesn't mean that you always think biblically!

Here's where a bit of reflection on Mary's song – the Magnificat – is helpful to me. Mary readily admits that she's not an important person in the eyes of the world. She knew she was way down on the socio-economic ladder of life. But instead of stressing out over it, she actually rejoices in it! Look again at the beginning of her song, "...Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl...." (Luke 1:46-48 NLT) Think with me about Mary. First, she was a woman. Women had very little status in her day and age. Second, she was from

a lower class or peasant family. No nobility, no pedigree, no credentials, so to speak. Third, she was a virgin. We've so glorified this aspect of Mary that we forget that virginity was understood differently in her day. A wife and mother had at least a certain level of respect in that culture, but a young virgin from an inconsequential family was really at the bottom of what that society valued in terms of people and their worth. Forget about just being ordinary! Mary, by all the ways people defined self-worth in her day and age, was a nobody.

But what does Mary know here that we often forget? Christmas is for the ordinary person, because God loves the ordinary person. In fact, God seems to prefer showing His mercy, love and power to those and in those who seem least likely either to receive it or deserve it. God loves insignificant people. God loves unimportant people. God loves people who - for whatever reason - seem to lack much value or worth as determined by the culture around them. In fact, God seems to focus His time, energy and efforts upon exactly those kinds of folk! The Bible explains why this is so. "Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of 'the brightest and the best' among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these 'nobodies' to expose the hollow pretensions of the 'somebodies'? That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God. Everything that we have—right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start—comes from God by way of Jesus Christ. That's why we have the saying, 'If you're going to blow a horn, blow a trumpet for God.'" (1 Corinthians 1:26-31 MSG) Mary is a fulfillment of those verses. It's all about who is going to get the glory. And God always chooses people who say by their lives and their actions, "It's all about You, God!"

If you feel just ordinary today, rejoice! Celebrate your ordinariness! But, perhaps, you feel less than ordinary. Perhaps you feel unworthy. Is there something in your past that makes you think God could not love you? You are so wrong. Is there some failure, some sin, some heartache, some disappointment, or some setback that makes you feel as if God could not value you? You are so wrong. Maybe you feel too young, too old, too uneducated, too boring, or too untalented for God to use you in some way to do His will. You are so wrong. Christmas is about the ordinary person, because Jesus came for ordinary people. Would you remember that when you partake of the body and blood of Jesus in a few minutes? Jesus died for you despite your unworthiness of that kind of love. Jesus lives for you and in you despite your sheer ordinariness. Secondly:

### **CHRISTMAS IS FOR THE NEEDY PERSON.**

Mary sings, " 'He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands.'" (Luke 1:53 NLT) When I use the word "needy" am I talking about people who are literally poor or spiritually poor? You know, "poor in spirit" or whatever. Both! There is such a thing as spiritual poverty biblically speaking. What is that? It simply means that you recognize that before God you are needy at all times and in every way. You are always in His debt and you always will be. You can't bestow

lasting joy and peace upon yourself. You can't infuse your own life with adequate meaning and purpose for the long haul. You can't forgive your own sins. You can't give yourself eternal life. You can't somehow earn or deserve a relationship with God. Instead, all you can do is throw yourself upon God and His mercy and grace every day that you live. Truly, your spiritual need is continual and perpetual. One reason we celebrate the Lord's Supper regularly – as we will do again this morning – is that it reinforces the truth of our continual need for God's grace and love.

But there's another aspect of being needy that can get overlooked. Mary was probably literally poor by any standard of measurement. Many of the first Christians were literally poor. Many people in the lower classes of that day – for example, slaves – were the first ones to embrace the good news about Jesus. Many people in developing countries today where the Christian faith is growing by leaps and bounds are literally poor. Here's a truth that comes out clearly in the Bible. God is on the side of those who are poor and disadvantaged. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament underline this truth. "If you help the poor, you are lending to the LORD— and he will repay you!" (Proverbs 19:17 NLT) "Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world." (James 1:27 MSG)

This isn't about glorifying poverty. This isn't about insisting that you become poor. This isn't even about getting all sentimental and dewy-eyed about helping poor people and thinking that our efforts are going to change someone's life. This is about being on God's side and God is clearly on the side of the literally poor and disadvantaged in this world. I don't know about you, but I just want to be on God's side wherever that is. And for whatever reason, God has a special place in His heart for those who are literally poor and in need. I think that means that you and I personally need to find ways to serve the poor in our community and in our world. I think that means that our church needs to find additional ways to serve the poor as well. I believe one of our best ministries is our food pantry. I hope and pray that in coming months and years we find additional ways to serve the poor. I just want to be on God's side, folks, don't you?!

There may be some folk here today who are really struggling financially. Whether you can be classified as poor or not, I don't know, but you often feel a sickening anxiety overwhelm you when you think about getting your basic needs met. The Magnificat reminds us that God is on your side. He does care. He will provide. I don't know how, but He will make a way where there seems to be no way. And to the rest of us here today, let's remember that we're entering a season where there's no shortage of opportunities to reach out in loving and practical ways to needy people both inside and outside this church family. The Magnificat reminds us that it's more than just a nice, "Christmasy" thing to do. It's a way of demonstrating that you're on God's side. Part of following Jesus is to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and shelter the homeless. Christmas is for the needy person – needy spiritually and needy literally – because Jesus came for needy people. Third:

**CHRISTMAS IS FOR THE HUMBLE PERSON.**

Humility is a sweet melody we hear in the Magnificat. “His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones. He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble.” (Luke 1:51-52 NLT) What is the worst sin of all? The essential sin – the sin at the core of every sin large or small – is pride. You name it – murder, adultery, fraud, racism, gossip – they all get started because of that deadliest of spiritual cancer cells – pride. It’s true – the devil became the devil because of pride. He wanted to be like God and he still does. And pride is the underlying cause for every misery in your life, in your family, in your home, in your office, in your nation and in your world. Pride leads to every other kind of sin.

Wouldn’t it be great if pride just got zapped forever the moment you put your trust in Jesus for salvation? Instead it can sometimes become the worst kind of pride – spiritual pride. Have you noticed that Jesus was able to tolerate and be patient with just about every kind of sin except one? He simply couldn’t stomach the spiritual pride of the Jewish leaders who became His enemies. Why? As long as you’re proud, you can’t really know or love God. You know you’ve been in God’s presence when you realize afresh His bigness, His holiness and His significance. Coming face to face with your smallness, your uncleanness and your insignificance can be uncomfortable to say the least but it’s necessary if you want to know God. And then, proud people aren’t just wrong with God; they’re wrong with other people, too. Pride has this way of destroying every human relationship it touches.

How do you know that God is working humility into your soul? That’s kind of tricky, isn’t it? Because then you start congratulating yourself on how humble you are which brings you back to pride! But, suffice it to say, that true humility is not some kind of groveling, sniveling sort of thing. Instead it just means, first of all, coming to God and before God with empty hands each day and throwing yourself upon His grace. It means living each day on the basis of what He’s done for you rather than on the basis of what you think you’ve done for Him. One evidence of humility is a profoundly and consistently grateful heart attitude. You just can’t quite ever get over what God has done for you. You remain in awe of God and what’s He’s done for you all your life. And that changes how you relate to people, too. For one thing, you can no longer waste precious energy and spiritual capital feeling either judgmental about or superior to others. You’re just so grateful that God is forgiving your faults and extending to you His eternal acceptance.

If pride is an issue for you, then the Lord’s Table either offends you or doesn’t matter to you. This Table is a constant reminder of what God had to do for you because you couldn’t do it for yourself. You can’t save yourself. You can’t earn heaven. You don’t deserve forgiveness and eternal life. The Lord’s Supper is a reminder that you’re in such desperate need that God had to send a baby to save you. That baby was the One of whom Mary sang – the Lord Jesus Christ – her Son and our Savior. Christmas is for the humble person, because Jesus came for humble people.

Popular author, Lee Strobel, tells a compelling story from his pre-Christian days when he was an atheist and working as a journalist for the Chicago Tribune. He was

assigned to report on the struggles of an impoverished, inner city family during the weeks leading up to Christmas. The first time he met the Delgados – 60 year old Perfecta and her two granddaughters, Lydia and Jenny - he was amazed at their lack of possessions. They'd just been burned out of their roach-infested tenement and were now living in a tiny, two room apartment. No furniture, no rugs, no pictures. Just a small kitchen table and one handful of rice. That was it. In fact, 11 year old Lydia and 13 year old Jenny owned only one short sleeved dress each, plus one thin, gray sweater between them. When they walked the half mile to school through the biting cold, Lydia would wear the sweater for part of the distance and then hand it to her shivering sister who would wear it the rest of the way. But despite their poverty and the painful arthritis that kept Perfecta from working, she still talked confidently about her faith in Jesus. She was convinced that He hadn't abandoned them. No despair. No self-pity. Just a gentle feeling of hope and peace.

Strobel finished his article and it ran in the paper. But he found his thoughts returning often to the Delgados and their unflinching belief in God's goodness. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on him. Here was a family that had nothing but faith and yet seemed happy, while he had everything he needed materially, but lacked faith. Inside he felt as empty and barren as the Delgado's apartment. On Christmas Eve – a slow news day – he decided to pay the Delgados a visit. When he arrived, he was amazed at what he saw. Several people who read his article had responded to the family's need in overwhelming fashion. New furniture. New rugs. New appliances. A large Christmas tree and stacks of wrapped presents. Bags of food. A large selection of winter clothes. Readers had even donated a generous amount of cash.

But it wasn't the gifts that shocked Lee Strobel the most; it was the Delgados' response to those gifts. Perfecta and her granddaughters were getting ready to give away much of their newfound wealth. When Strobel asked Perfecta why, she said, "Our neighbors are still in need. We cannot have plenty while they have nothing. This is what Jesus would want us to do." Lee asked her about the generosity of the people who had sent all these gifts. Perfecta's response, "This is wonderful; this is very good. We did nothing to deserve this – it's a gift from God. But it is not His greatest gift. No, we celebrate that tomorrow. That is Jesus." That day, Lee Strobel says, he saw Jesus in Perfecta and her granddaughters. Christmas is for the ordinary person. Christmas is for the needy person. Christmas is for the humble person. And when you find those kinds of people, you find the Christ.