

The Magnificat Luke 1:46ff.

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Steve DeWitt

For Christians this truly is a most wonderful time of the year. There are many reasons why our culture, in general, celebrates: *being with family and friends*. This is our first married Christmas and we will be spending time with my family in Des Moines and her family in Kansas City. For both of us, it's the first time navigating Christmas with both sides of the family. I hope your time with your family is very blessed.

Gift giving. Most of us like to give gifts and all of us like to receive them. *Food. Vacation.* There are lots of reasons for joy at this time of year no matter what your faith is or isn't.

But as Christians, there is a gladness we have because behind the cultural and sentimental celebrations of Christmas, there is something real and true and historical. Something happened that goes far beyond what silver bells, sleighs, and lights can symbolize. There is a story. A true story. A wonderful story. A story that the Bible says is remembered, not with presents and carols, but with faith. We remember by believing it is true and that the little baby in the manger was the Son of God. This has nothing to do with sentimentality but with truth and meaning and joy and wonder. We will get to that.

Luke gives the most detailed account of the birth of Jesus. No surprise, Luke was a doctor. Doctors are scientists who study things in detail. Luke gives us the birth narrative in high definition. He gives the backstory about John the Baptist's parents and birth. He describes events of Mary's pregnancy, and world events like the empire census. He tells us that Jesus the baby was wrapped in "swaddling" clothes. Luke very much wants us to know the story.

However, there is a big difference between knowing the story and understanding the story. Luke wants that as well and he explains it in a most unusual way—a song. We will get to that in a few minutes.

The Christmas Story in ►► (Fast Forward)

Luke 1 doesn't begin in Nazareth or Bethlehem or even with Mary and Joseph. It begins in Jerusalem with Zechariah the priest and an angel appearing to him telling him his elderly wife will give birth to a very special son. He was to name him John and he would be like Elijah. Sure enough, God enables Zechariah, the older man, and his wife Elisabeth to become pregnant. By the way, any similarities to an announcement earlier in this service [Pastor Steve's wife Jennifer is pregnant!] are purely coincidental.

Zechariah and Elisabeth have a cousin, a young woman, who lived in Nazareth. Her name was Mary. Mary was in her mid-teens which in that day was prime age for a girl to get married. She was betrothed to a man named Joseph. Betrothal was like our engagement on steroids. The commitment was so strong that to get out of a betrothal required a divorce. It was almost-marriage without the cohabitation or the consummation.

Nazareth was a little town whose only reputation was that it had no reputation. It was a wide spot in the road and little more. The first personal thing Luke tells us about her is that she is a virgin. Why that is important will become clear. The angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her that she will give birth to a son and his name will be Jesus. *"He will be great*

and will be called the Son of the Most High.” (Luke 1:32) Mary asks for clarification, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Verse 34) The angel tells her that God will create this life in her. Mary’s response? “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” (Verse 38)

Let’s pick up the story nine months later. The Caesar of Rome called for a census and everyone had to go to the city of their heritage. We find out that Joseph and, likely Mary, are both descendants of King David. That gets the Messianic juices flowing. David was from Bethlehem, so Mary and Joseph have to make their way to Bethlehem to be registered. The timing couldn’t be worse and it couldn’t be better. Mary is at full-term in her pregnancy. It’s a bad time for her to travel on foot (or as legend says, donkey) 40 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The timing couldn’t be better as world events are orchestrated by God to get Mary of Nazareth to the little town that prophecy said Jesus would be born in. It is a good thing to keep in mind with our world events, that all of them are orchestrated by God to fulfill his purposes.

Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem and hope to stay with hospitable family or fellow Jews. This was customary. However, the census has brought so many people to Bethlehem that there isn’t a cot to be found anywhere. The only shelter available was a stable, likely a cave. After settling in there, Mary goes into labor. That very night, the child that the angel Gabriel told both Mary and Joseph would come, arrived—Jesus.

Behind the spiritual curtain, heaven is partying. They want to tell someone. They chose the most unlikely people: Hobbits. No, they were shepherds. They are really the last people we would expect, as shepherds were at the bottom of the social ladder. They were loners. Transients. But heaven chooses who heaven chooses and often they aren’t who anyone would expect. An angel appeared to the shepherds and announced that a Savior had been born, he is Christ the Lord. None of these shepherds had PhDs or even honorary doctorates, but you don’t have to be too bright to know that if angels come and tell you something, it’s a big deal. The shepherds immediately go into Bethlehem to see what all the fuss is about.

They go door to door asking, “Anyone seen a baby just born around here lying in a manger?” Somehow they find Mary and Joseph, and Jesus lying in a most unlikely place for the King of Kings. He is wrapped in clothes lying in the little carved out spot in the rock where they would feed the animals. They tell Mary and Joseph about the angelic announcement and then tell everyone they can. It was a moment of great rejoicing.

There is much more to what happened, but remember there is a big difference between knowing the story and knowing what the story means. Luke wants us to know both. How does he explain what this means? *A song.* We often turn to our poets and songwriters to capture the meaning of things. Historians tell what happened. Artists tell what it means.

In this case, the artist is none other than Mary herself. We don’t have the melody, but we do have the lyrics.

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his

servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” (Luke 1:46-55)

This song is known as Mary’s Magnificat. Your Bible may have that little heading listed above this section. It’s an amazingly doctrinal song for a 14-year-old. We see God’s wisdom in choosing Mary to raise the one of whom the Old Testament speaks as she is clearly a woman of the Word. Would that all our teens and all our women would be women of the Word like Mary. Why is it called the Magnificat? Is this like Mr. Holland’s Opus? Mr. Holland’s masterpiece? Mary’s masterpiece? Her magnificat? It’s not about Mary’s magnificence and Christmas isn’t about Mary either. Let’s let Mary tell us, focusing on verses 46-48.

Four Words That Explain What Christmas is All About

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.”

Magnifies

My soul magnifies the Lord. “My soul” is Mary’s soul. Soul speaks to the inner person, the real us, the essence of our being. This song flows from her heart, and in her heart, she magnifies the Lord.

What does it mean to magnify the Lord? To magnify sounds like I make him bigger. I like a well-known illustration of a telescope and a microscope. (See John Piper’s Desiring God website www.desiringgod.org for use of this.) Both of them are made of glass and both allow you to see things you don’t normally see, yet they do it in completely different ways. A microscope makes little things big. The amoeba under the glass slide looks like a monster. The cell in the blade of grass looks huge. A microscope makes little things appear bigger than they are. It blows them out of proportion.

A telescope also magnifies, but it does the opposite of the microscope. A telescope helps me see how big things really are. A telescope takes massive and galactically huge realities and enlarges them to my understanding. A telescope makes me say, “Wow!” A telescope creates wonder. A telescope doesn’t make things seem bigger than they really are; a telescope shows how big they really are.

The first ever Christmas song is not about making a little thing big, but realizing in our hearts and souls the enormity that God became flesh. The Son of God became a human, and not just a human, the smallest human; a dividing egg of humanity within Mary’s womb. How can this be? How can someone spiritual become physical? How can someone whose personhood is so majestic as to place tens of thousands of angels on their knees in worship—this one—into the womb of a mother? How can something so big become so small?

Christmas is about telescoping, not microscoping. Our culture tries to microscope it. *This whole Jesus thing isn’t such a big deal. It’s a myth. It’s an inspiring story. It’s the spirit of Christmas; it’s a feeling or sense. It’s not a historical event. Let’s minimize it. Remove it. Change the language. It’s just a holiday. Just a cultural thing. It’s small, not big.*

To this Mary says, *“My soul magnifies the Lord.”* My soul telescopes the majesty of what God is doing to place within me the holy Messiah come to save the world. Before Jesus’ cross, and suffering, and resurrection and all his teaching and the full expression of his earthly ministry, all Mary had was Old Testament prophecy and what the angel told her. Yet

this was enough for her soul, like a telescope, to enlarge the glory of God in the sending of his son within her, and it produced worship.

Magnify. Microscope or telescope? This Christmas, which are you holding? Is this a little thing to you that people are trying to make a big deal about or is it a massive wonder-producing reality that I can't understand fully but what I see is marvelous?

Rejoice

...and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. (Luke 1:46)

If there is any emotion that jumps out of the story of Christmas, it's joy. Think of the cast of characters. Angels fill the sky with light and singing. The shepherds rush to Bethlehem with wonder and leave with joy. Mary and Joseph have the joy of new parents. Everyone who knows what has happened is filled with joy. Rejoicing.

Even months before, Mary is singing a song of gladness over what God has done. Why is everyone so happy? The long-awaited and hoped for Messiah has come. *"Joy to the world! The Lord has come; let earth receive her king!"*

Humble

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant." (Luke 1:46-48)

We see Mary's character here. She is given an honor beyond imagination. In fact, what higher human honor could there be? You can imagine what the normal person today would do with this, leveraging for their own glory: TV Talk shows, billboards, cereal boxes.

Mary does the opposite. She sees her unworthiness. She knows who she is, a simple Jewish girl from a town of no reputation. We see much here to admire in her. Her character and her humility shine.

What we see here is that she didn't self-admire. She didn't post on Facebook that she, above all women, was chosen to bear the Son of God. The picture of her is one of shock and wonder that she of all people would be called to this.

From her perspective, she's the *wrong girl*. Why not a rich man's daughter or a ruler's daughter in Jerusalem? *Wrong guy*. Joseph was a carpenter, not a king. Wrong circumstance. Who makes a woman walk and ride a couple days' journey the week of giving birth? *Wrong setting*. The right setting would be a palace with attendants and doctors and the finest cloth and a crib throne which he is immediately placed upon and choirs and dancers and trumpets and regalia of all kind.

That is how the King of Kings should be born, but it's so opposite as to be scandalous. A nobody girl from a nowhere town married to a guy nobody's heard of, giving birth in a stable, placed in a feeding trough, and this is the Son of God? This has to be of God because no human would do it this way. The whole thing is humble.

Why? God is saving the world through weakness and entering into our brokenness by becoming one of us. A birth of such humble beginnings born to a woman of humble estate to die for the humble and the broken and the meek of the earth. He came humble to save the humble and Mary was one of them.

"Who among us will celebrate Christmas right? Those who finally lay down all their power, honor, and prestige, all their vanity, pride, and self-will at the manger, those who stand by the lowly and let God alone be exalted, those who see in the child in the manger the glory of God precisely in this lowliness." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Savior

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

In God my Savior. Mary was a virgin but she wasn't sinless. Sinless people don't need a Savior, but Mary clearly saw her need. Her son was also her Savior.

That really gets at the heart of what Christmas is about, the need for a Savior. When Gabriel spoke to Joseph he said, *She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.* (Matthew 1:21) Jesus came to save us from our sins.

Who me? I don't need a Savior. Friend, if the woman God chose to bear his own son needed a Savior, don't you think you do too?

Mary's Magnificat is a guide for us by seeing these four words in reverse. I need a Savior. Think of your life before Christ or without Christ. What if he would never have come? This humbles me and puts me in my proper place. Lowliness. Desperation. But he has come and what better news than Immanuel, Christ with us. This gives joy, like the angels and shepherds, and from that joy flows worship, *"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant."* (Luke 1:46-48)

Magnify. Rejoice. Be humble. Remember your need for a Savior.

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