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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/23/2012, The Fourth Sunday of Advent
Micah 5:2-5a, Psalm 80, Hebrews 10:5-10, Luke 1:39-55
Mary's Magnificat

⁴⁶And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord..." (Luke 1:46, RSV)

So begins Mary's song of thanks and praise to the LORD which are part of the readings for today, the fourth and last Sunday of Advent. With these words, Mary sings of the Lord's faithfulness to the covenant he had made with Israel. Let me speak a bit about that covenant.

In the Old Testament, in the Second Book of Samuel (2 Samuel 7:15-16), the prophet Nathan told King David that his offspring would continue to rule, but that God would punish his descendants for the iniquities which they would commit. Speaking through Nathan, God said,

¹⁴I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men; ¹⁵but I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever. (2 Samuel 7:14-16, RSV)

Now, you all remember what happened. Because of the iniquities of the people and the wickedness of their kings, God raised up Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon who invaded Israel. His army captured Jerusalem, **destroyed the Temple**, and deported the Israelites into exile in Babylon. How could this be? Had God broken his promise?

No he did not, for here we have Gabriel telling Mary that this son she would bear, our Jesus, would receive the throne of his father David and his **reign would be for ever**, in fact, "of his kingdom will be **no end**." (verse 33).

So with this background, we now turn to Mary's response. First, let's note that Mary joins other women in the Bible who gave birth through the intervention of the LORD. One was Sarai, wife of Father Abraham. Her name was changed to Sarah because she laughed when she was told that she would conceive. As you remember, she gave birth to Isaac and this fulfilled part of God's covenant with Abraham: Abraham would have descendants.

Another well-known instance of a birth involving the work of the LORD was the birth of the great prophet, Samuel. His mother, Hannah, was barren. She prayed to God and did conceive. Two things are noteworthy in this. One is that she promised that her son would be given as a nazirite to serve God. One of the

characteristics of a nazerite was that he would drink no alcohol and live a strict life. His hair was not to be shorn. This reminds us of John the Baptist. The second aspect I want to raise about Hannah is that she, like Mary, gave thanks to the LORD in a beautiful song. It begins like this:

¹Hannah also prayed and said, “My heart exults in the LORD;
my strength is exalted in the LORD... (1 Samuel 2:1, RSV)

So now let us look at Mary’s song. We all know it well. It has been set to music by many composers. Bach wrote a magnificent cantata using it as the text. At seminary we sing it in many different settings of Anglican chant at Evensong. We sang it here at Immanuel last week and this morning..

I want to focus on the opening line. Mary sings, “My soul doth *magnify* the LORD.” I have always wondered how it is possible to magnify what is already infinite. Here are some of my thoughts. To magnify can mean to enlarge—not to enlarge the LORD himself, for that cannot be done, but to enlarge our *perception* of him. I am thankful that my eyesight is very good, but in the last few years, when I am in dim light, or dealing with very small print, I have a hard time reading. I fix this by putting on a pair of reading glasses which **magnify** the print. The size of the print really hasn’t changed, but I now can read it because the lenses have enlarged it. They have **magnified** it so that I see it more clearly. This is what Mary is singing about. In her song, she aims to enlarge her praise of the Lord—to give more adequate expression to the praise the Lord deserves.

She continues in her song of thanks and praise by proclaiming the goodness and greatness of the LORD. She sings of his mercy, his strength, his help, and his fulfilling of his promise to Abraham and his posterity **for ever. By doing this, others will see God more clearly.**

So this is a beautiful event. Mary knows she is going to give birth to Jesus who is the Son of God and sings this song of praise. We remember this at Advent right before we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Can we bring this event of over 2,000 years ago which happened to a specific person into our lives and make it real for us—each and every one of us—now? I think we can.

For starters, we do it every week in the introduction to our confessional prayer. We take our place beside Mary, asking for purity and a spirit of gratitude like hers. Pastor Fryer leads us in asking Almighty God to “cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily **magnify** your holy name.” Now that’s an example of what we do as members of the body of Christ. I want now to speak about this for us on an individual basis.

In my New Testament class at seminary, each of us had to do a large final paper and present a synopsis of it to the class. One of my fellow seminarians, Nick Meachem was speaking about his project which involved the Annunciation. This was the reading which Kirstin read for us last Sunday. Nick made a comment about these verses which stopped me in my tracks. He said, “God trusted Mary.”

Now think about this. God, the creator of all things entrusted one of his creatures, Mary, to bring His Son, Jesus, into this world to atone for our sins and to offer salvation to those who believe in him.

God trusted Mary.

I thought about this for awhile and then I realized something: God trusts **us** too. It is part of his genuine goodwill toward us. Another man, for example, might speak well of us and even mean us well, but has been too often burned by us, so that now it is hard for him to trust us. His heart might be large, but not *that* large that he can go on trusting us, especially with an important project. But the LORD has such a huge heart that I think it can truly be said of us that he trusts us with some important work day by day. Like parents whose love and hope is never entirely wearied out, so the Lord looks at us afresh every day and says to himself, “This is my son, my very daughter. I claimed him so in Baptism. I claimed her. I mean to put my trust in this one today.” God trusts each and every one of us. He trusts us with His message. We too are to magnify the Lord.

Let’s consider some ways we might go about magnifying God’s holy name.

What first comes to mind is two of the songs which our children’s choir sang a few months ago: One is “This Little Light of Mine”. I’m sure you know it well: “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.” Another is “Do Lord” which has the line “I took Jesus as my savior, you take him too.”

We are all called to share the Gospel. This can be done in many ways. It might be that a friend asks you about your faith or about church. Well, let your light shine. Tell them about Jesus. You might feel reluctant, but I encourage you to try gently. You will be surprised at how the Holy Spirit will lead the conversation. You might want to invite them to a service. Maybe their faith has lapsed. Maybe they were not blessed growing up in a family of faith. Bring them to church!

Here’s another suggestion. Holidays often give us great joy, but sometimes they can cause people to feel low. Maybe someone is out of work. Maybe they lost a loved one during the year. Maybe life has just been hard for them. The holidays can sometimes intensify these feelings. If you know someone who is feeling low at this time of year, reach out. Extend some compassion. Offer companionship. Listen to them. Sometimes just letting someone talk helps them out.

Certainly two other ways to magnify the LORD are to pray and to worship. Praying allows us not only to **speak** to God, but also to **hear** His answers. We should pray at all times, but especially as Advent is concluding. And of course, worship. When we gather for worship, we are the body of Christ on earth. We magnify His name when we come together to worship.

Finally, remember that through Christ, all things are possible. Jesus is not a memory. Jesus is alive—**in each and every one of us who has faith**.

I close with this thought: Advent comes at a time of year when the days get shorter and the nights get longer. It is interesting that we change all of this in modern times with our Christmas lights. They are wonderful to see and they remind us of the joy which we feel at Christmas, but still, they are modern inventions and conveniences. In the time of Jesus, fewer hours of daylight meant

more hours of darkness. Sometimes, mischief, bad deeds, and wickedness are supported by darkness.

But no mischief, bad deeds, or wickedness *for us* in Advent! Our Lord is not trusting us for the bad, but for the good. In days of old, the great prophet Isaiah said that “the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light.” (Is 9:2) **We** are those people. **We** have seen that great light! So, as our days grow shorter, we can take heart as Mary did. We can magnify the LORD here and now. We all have lights to shine, shine, shine to the glory of Jesus, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.