

Do Our Souls Magnify the Lord?

The Very Rev. Canon Harry Krauss
Grace Church in New York
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*“Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.’”
(Luke 1:46-47)*

If I didn't know better I might think today is the 31st of May. The gospel for today would have us think so. What do I mean? We've heard this gospel already back in May. It is the story of the visitation of Mary with her cousin, Elizabeth. But this morning, I'd like us to think about it as the story behind the story we'll soon celebrate in less than a week.

I'm a fan of back stories. Maybe that's why I can be found amongst the file cabinets and boxes in the parish archives from time to time. May be it's why someone like St. Paul told the Roman's (10: 14)“How can they know who to trust if they haven't heard of the One who can be trusted? And how can they hear if nobody tells them. And how is anyone going to tell them, unless someone is sent to tell them?” It seems to me that back stories also can be a great help to understanding the world we live in and our life of faith.

Obviously a lot's going on in this back story. Even though I just read it, suffice it to say that Mary and her older cousin, Elizabeth, are having an unplanned visit. To the surprise of both of them they are pregnant. When they meet, Luke tells us that Elizabeth's “babe leaped in her womb”. Somehow it dawned on Elizabeth that something more extraordinary than even her own pregnancy might be happening. Somehow she sensed that Mary might have had something to do with it, that her cousin's faith was rich and rare. Elizabeth cried out, “blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” And then Mary recites one of the most moving understandings of living faith we might ever expect to hear. At first we might think what a lovely witness and testimony it is. Let's not be fooled. There's so much more to it.

For me there are two parts to this Gospel episode. The spotlight of course falls on the two women. Not only does Gabriel bring good news to Mary about herself, that she's pregnant by no one less than the Holy Spirit, but he also shares the same good news about her elderly cousin, Elizabeth. If nothing else they have been chosen for this task at perhaps the most inconvenient times of their lives to be pregnant. After all Mary is as it were just getting started in life. Elizabeth on the other hand, is “in her old age.”

So Mary, we are told by some scholars, ancient and modern, is taken by Joseph from Nazareth about 100 miles to a place called Ein Karem. Perhaps Mary wanted to be with someone familiar, who understands, and who might listen. Perhaps Mary wanted to be with someone who also might feel that the miraculous gift she too has received just might end up being a burden. And if that's not a great deal for a very young mother and a very old mother to deal with, how about the customs and community in which they are living? Elizabeth is past child bearing age. How is that to be explained? The gossip network must have been in overdrive. That's not the done thing in Ein Karem. And Mary, Mary is a teenager, only

engaged, and to an older man, Joseph, at that. What that all about? That's not the done thing in Nazareth either.

Now one theological tradition, fairly enough, has claimed from the earliest times that this visit is about the gift of grace being brought by Mary to Elizabeth. It prefigures the grace which Jesus, her baby, always showed his cousin, John the Baptist, Elizabeth's baby. This claim is surely a blessing and ought not to be given short shrift.

However, I want to suggest that maybe there is another thing to look at in part one of this story behind the story, that's the companionship of Mary and Elizabeth. I took a whirl through Pinterest, that media service of "inspiration and discovery" and had a look at the way in which some great artists depicted this visit. In many of them the cousins are holding hands or embracing one another. We might well miss this kind of custom these days, thanks to Covid, but in Mary and Elizabeth's case was it just a custom? I suggest it's the body language thing. Whatever might happen they are in it together, they'll face it together. In some of the paintings Mary and Elizabeth seem to be whispering to each other. Are they trying to identify the vision they should follow? Are they quietly planning how to stand up to the immediate ostracism that confronts them? I'd like to think that their quiet thoughtfulness and conversation in such a challenging situation might be an example to us who live in a world where nothing is private where there is no way to let plans quietly take form.

So some things seem to set them apart. Things like sharing their thoughts and feelings with others, reaching out for support, loving deeply, giving gifts to the world, facing the day with possibility. One essayist reflected that these define brave people and I believe the two cousins are very brave indeed.

How remarkable; facing things together, having a vision, being brave. These things are the content of their companionship. Yet they are part of another kind of companionship which shows up in some of the paintings, a greater companionship than their own. It is with God. In this relationship they know that God's presence in their predicaments is nothing less than the powerhouse, the source of joy, the source of strength and comfort which make it work. How many of us have come to understand that companionship is also a way forward in our own time? Mary and Elizabeth remind us not only of its value, but also that it just doesn't happen. In the family of the faith we need to be on the lookout to make it happen.

The high point of this story awaits. The cousins' conversation takes a stunning turn. Mary not only confesses her faith, but offers you and me one of the great songs of Christian tradition, The Magnificat. Of course we've already heard it sung this morning. (In fact, her song is the longest set of words offered by a woman in the New Testament.) Have you ever considered what she is confessing, however? Or are the words too familiar and we say or sing them and away they go? Let me admit, however, that it meant nothing much to me until I was about 18. When I was a boy, I'd been in a men and boys choir and the Magnificat was standard stuff. I can't remember how many versions we sang. Don't tell Dr. Allen, I hadn't paid much attention to what it meant. But the moment came when the light bulb came on.

On the way home from my first year at college I stopped off in Washington for a day or two. With a friend I went to the National Cathedral for Evensong. We sat up in the Great Choir adjacent to the choir itself. All was as usual until the choir stood and sang the Magnificat. Of course, the singing was superb. Next to my friend and me was an older man in a dark blue suit. When the singing began he pulled out a manuscript of music and as the choir continued

through the Magnificat he quickly made notes all over that manuscript. The strange thing was that while I watched him out of the corner of my eye I actually began to listen to what was being sung. It was Mary's extraordinary witness to what was happening in her life way back in Nazareth all of those centuries ago and I thought at that moment maybe even a witness to what was happening in that June of 1964. To be sure, I paid little attention to the rest of the liturgy. The very involvement of the man in the blue suit in the manuscript of the Magnificat somehow moved me to try to figure out what it was all about. To my surprise, after the service he turned and asked me if I were a musician and I told him no. I then said, "You must be one" as I pointed to the manuscript. In a very simple way he said, "Yes, this is what they were singing". The man next to him said, "Young man, he wrote it." Only later did I find out he was Leo Sowerby, a Pulitzer Prize winning composer, who at that time was the Director of the College of Church Music of the National Cathedral. I owe him a lot for pushing me into the joy of Mary's witness at last.

So what's the message Our Lady, that teenager from Nazareth, wants us to hear this morning as we are thinking about Christmas? I think that I'll let that great saint, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, weigh in. Pastor Bonhoeffer was an extraordinary Christian in an extraordinary time. He tended to take unconventional views and speak truth to power. Just at the end of World War II he was murdered by the Nazis because of this. For him the Magnificat was, "the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say, the most revolutionary hymn ever sung." Was Bonhoeffer kidding? No. Where did Mary meek and lowly go? Nowhere. Do we have to present Mary in a different for the pageant on Christmas Eve? No.

Let's have a look at Mary the "passionate" first. What a way to start her song. She calls God her savior. Some have found this odd. Why would Mary need a savior? She is actually bearing Jesus himself. Isn't she somehow above worldly confusion and mistakes? But Mary's better than that. She sees herself just like us. She knows her shortcomings, her mistakes, her fears, and anxieties. When she sings that God regards her lowliness she's not playing the doormat, but patterning humility for you and me. Mary, yet the teenager, has stood long enough in the Lord's presence to understand that our God is merciful and gracious. If she feels unworthy she knows that God offers us fresh starts. Mary is passionate in her faith because she knows that the Lord loves the unqualified, the unimpressive, the needy and flawed, just like you and me. She's giving us the answer to the question we may have asked ourselves more than once, "Isn't it strange that God knows me so well and yet chooses me anyway?" What a wise young woman.

Finally, how about Mary, the revolutionary? The last half of the Magnificat seems to be just as Bonhoeffer described. There's one contrast after the next; turns or revolutions from bad to good. God shows strength with his arm, scatters the proud, puts down the mighty, exalts the lowly, fills the hungry with good things, sends away the rich, mercifully he helps Israel. This catalogue may seem dramatic. Is this the way God really acts?

The truth of the matter is that Mary has actually been singing of good news. The revolutionary thing is that God is the only one who always does what he says he would do: Offer us grace, mercy, and life eternal. Turn what is upside down, right-side up; nations, peoples, and us. Intervene in our lives for our good. What a joyful and holy preparation for the Feast of the Lord's Nativity Mary has shared with Elizabeth and each of us. May we always magnify the Lord and rejoice in God our Savior.

AMEN.