

### **Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

<sup>1</sup>The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
<sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
<sup>3</sup> to provide for those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.  
<sup>4</sup> They shall build up the ancient ruins,  
they shall raise up the former devastations;  
they shall repair the ruined cities,  
the devastations of many generations.  
<sup>8</sup> For I the LORD love justice,  
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;  
I will faithfully give them their recompense,  
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.  
<sup>9</sup> Their descendants shall be known among the nations,  
and their offspring among the peoples;  
all who see them shall acknowledge  
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.  
<sup>10</sup> I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,  
my whole being shall exult in my God;  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.  
<sup>11</sup> For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations.

### **Luke 1:39-56**

<sup>39</sup>In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." <sup>46</sup>And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>and my spirit

rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup>for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup>His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup>He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup>according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” <sup>56</sup>And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

## HOW DO WE MAGNIFY THE LORD?

Do you remember learning about magnification as a child? I remember getting a hold of my first magnifying glass – I think it was from a box of Cracker Jacks. I soon progressed from magnifying words and pictures to burning plastic and teasing friends. When I was a little I graduated to a microscope and starting putting anything and everything under a slide. I remember that microscope came with brine shrimp – that was pretty cool. I also looked at human hair and different plant cells. It was fascinating to see common things in this new light, magnified to show the structure and complexity.

In our reading from Luke today, Mary says, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” I suppose that a microscope magnifies the Lord in one sense; we see deeper into creation. We may say that we “see” God in sunsets, majestic mountains and vast oceans, in the night sky and in the cool breeze, but we can become more in awe of God when we learn just how vast the sun really is, how deep the oceans are, or just how complicated a human body really is. Yet there is more to God than creation. All creation testifies to a creator who can certainly be admired. Yet the God to which the Bible testifies is much more than an impersonal creator. The God of scripture is a God who expresses himself through acts of compassion and love. I think of a confounded Moses talking to a bush – a God who had “seen the suffering” of people and had his heart set on setting them free. That’s more than a creator God would be interested in doing. That’s a God who has a particular outcome in mind, a God who has a plan that involves a certain quality of life for his creation, and that quality of life that God desires for us is indicative of the love that he has for that creation. In this sense you could say the Bible also magnifies the Lord by exposing much more of God than merely the creation that surrounds us.

Angels too must magnify the Lord; one of them sure helped Mary see God in a whole new light. Mary was probably the same as many a good church-going young woman; devout, pure, upright, pious, obedient. And like many a good church girl she didn’t have any amazing experience with the living God. All that changed very suddenly for Mary when an angel appears and informs her that she is to be the mother of the Savior of the world. Wow! The text says she was perplexed; that’s probably an understatement. I think she would have been in shock. Whatever the case may be, Mary was now seeing God through a new lens. All the talk that she had heard of a coming Savior had now been confirmed by an angel. She witnessed something that before was only theoretical to her, and her soul now magnifies the Lord, because Mary now has experienced something very new.

Whenever we gain a deeper insight into God’s nature or God’s plan, we too can magnify the Lord. Seascapes and purple mountains majesty are visible to the naked eye, but when we magnify the Lord we see new and exciting things about God’s nature. You’d think that everyone would want to magnify the Lord, but the truth is that not everyone *does* want to magnify the Lord. King Herod certainly didn’t; he wanted to murder the baby Jesus. Pharaoh didn’t; he wanted to keep God’s people in slavery and use a limited form of genocide to control their population. Some people resist magnifying the Lord because

what they see may offend them, may run counter to their own wills and agendas, may challenge them to think differently and act differently. Mary shares an important insight as she magnifies the Lord, saying "God has raised up the lowly, and scattered the proud, filled the bellies of the hungry and sent the rich away empty." I'm always saddened to see people who are poor and lowly feel so little sense of worth, as if worth was really measured in monetary terms, or in material wealth. I wonder if Mary initially felt such low self-esteem; she was just a Jewish girl in an occupied land where women were considered lesser than men, and anyone who was not a Roman citizen was a nobody. When the angel came to her, I imagine Mary's first thought was, "Why me?" – a woman with no power or privilege. Yet Jesus would go on to show just how blessed were the poor and the lowly; he spent most of his time with the poor and the lowly. Mary clearly "gets it;" God has chosen her, a poor and lowly teenage girl, to bear the savior of the world.

Mary also magnifies the Lord through her faith. It took a lot of guts for her to take on the task that the angel told her about. An unwed woman who was pregnant was not just an object of derision; her very life would have been in jeopardy, because her fiancé could have exposed her and she could have been executed by stoning. Perhaps that would have been more humane than dismissing her, because once the word got out that she was pregnant her own family could have disowned her – no one would have wanted to marry her, and a woman so marked living on the street might survive no more than a few months – there were no shelters for pregnant teens. I'm not sure if Mary knew what danger would follow her *after* Jesus' birth, as Herod sends his henchmen to murder the child – would they murder the parents as well? – but Mary certainly knew the ramifications of her being the mother of the Christ child. It took a lot of guts, a lot of *faith* for Mary to agree to this task, and her bold act of faith magnifies the Lord. She will not be stigmatized into thinking that she is unworthy because she is a woman or because she is poor. She will not be deterred from obeying God, regardless of the possible consequences.

I wonder how well we magnify the Lord in our culture. We claim to live in a just society, but are we a just society by God's standards? We boast of our democracy, a place where everyone has opportunity, where we can vote for our own representatives, where our civil rights are defended, but what about the poor and the hungry? God, speaking through Isaiah, says, "I love justice," but is justice only about protecting people's first amendment rights, not arbitrarily imprisoning someone or stifling their civil liberties? Mary gives testimony to God's version of justice by saying that the Lord "has filled the bellies of the hungry with good things AND sent the rich away empty." God's justice is about more than civil rights; it's about tending to needs that are more basic than civil liberties. It's about feeding people, clothing people, giving them a decent place to live, and tending to the sick. We love to proclaim equality under the law. We love to assert our democratic system of government, and we are proud that we defend personal freedom to such a degree, BUT ARE WE EQUALLY PROUD OF THE WAY WE CARE FOR THE POOR, THE HUNGRY, THE SICK AND THE NEEDY?

We may like to promote statistics on our per-capita income in the United States, but every day, in every city, there are people who don't get enough to eat, and don't have a decent place to call home. Yes, their civil liberties are protected, but their bellies are still empty.

Thomas Jefferson once said that an educated population is essential for the survival of democracy. And education needs to include the Wisdom of God, that is a *morally educated* populace, because an immoral democracy can sanction homelessness and starvation and even demonize the hungry and the homeless, casting them as "lazy" or "undeserving" which thinly veils the disturbing truth that we, by contrast, deserve everything we have; our stable job and our good salary because *we ourselves* are educated and productive. How easy it is for us to justify our lack of charity by assuming the other is "undeserving"

The “take home” message today varies according to which side of the tracks you think you live on. If you feel your conscience nudging you because you failed to “raise up the lowly” because you stereotype them as lazy or undeserving while you yourself feel justified because you are gainfully employed and have the means to care for yourself and your family, THEN YOU NEED TO START MAGNIFYING THE LORD by lifting up the lowly. Force yourself to look into that microscope and ask yourself, “Do I really *deserve* everything that I have?” Sure you’ve worked hard and played by the rules, but did you endow yourself with a good mind and a healthy body? Or were they given to you by a loving God who is expecting you to take your gifts and use them to raise up the lowly and fill the bellies of the hungry, to implement HIS justice?

If you feel that you yourself are among the LOWLY, then the take home from today’s message is to take heart. God does raise up the lowly. God does feed the bellies of the hungry. If you are doing the best you can, your poverty is no reason for shame; in fact it could be a reason for celebration if you have used your resources to raise up the lowly. Jesus no doubt could have climbed the social ladder in his day; he had the brains and the wit and the health to secure a decent job and make a living I suppose, but he chose to spend his time and money and energy on the lowly, and some who gazed upon him and his ragged company might have thought of him as lazy and undeserving. I don’t think such attitudes caused him any despair; he knew he was beloved by God, and the poor and the lowly *are* beloved of God.

Regardless of which side of the tracks you’re on this morning, I pray that you would magnify the Lord by recognizing how blessed we are to have Jesus, God’s love coming to us in flesh and blood, ensuring us that we are not alone but always in the company of God. Amen.