

“Magnify The Lord”

The Reverend Delilah Jane Phillips

Date: December 31, 2023



Christmas Eve 2023

Good morning, friends. I'm so thankful you chose to spend your Christmas Eve here at church thinking about how we have Christmas because of God's greatest gift to us, Jesus. I'm going to tell you about a few special parts of Jesus' birth today, some of which you already know but it's good to hear again. The best thing about our favorite stories is that we can hear them again and again and still learn something new. I hope you learn this one by heart and you can tell it for yourself anytime you want.

ANGEL: I'm going to start with an angel this morning, and we've been learning all throughout Advent that very often the angel starts by saying, "do not be afraid". That's right! And that's exactly what this Angel does.

This angel is talking to Mary. Mary might describe herself as an ordinary girl. She wasn't a princess or a queen. She was an ordinary person, just like you or I. But when the angel came to her with a message, everything changed. That's why we know the angel said, "do not be afraid!" Mary's life was about to change forever. The news that the angel brought? Mary was going to have a baby! And this baby was going to be named Jesus!

Mary was rightfully nervous, but also she said, "yes!"

Mary had a friend and cousin, her name was Elizabeth. Elizabeth was very old but she was also going to have a baby! Mary went to see Elizabeth and when they saw one another the baby in Elizabeth's womb gave a big happy kick--- the mommies knew this was going to be a very special baby. That's when Mary gives her speech.

Mary says, "My soul magnifies the lord!" That means ___ Makes Great ___ This is how we know who Mary really is- we know that she praises God, she's brave and she trusts God. When the time came to have the baby, it was a night like no other night.

NATIVITY Let's look together for a little town called Bethlehem. The little town that we see is in the hill country some ten miles south of Jerusalem. All is still and quiet.

JOSEPH AND MARY As night gathers, the last two travelers come slowly up the road with their donkey.

Look, there is Mary about to have her baby. She is walking with Joseph.

They are Joseph and our Mary who the angel spoke to from Nazareth.

They have walked for 6 days to come to this place where David the King was born so long ago. They have come, like so many others, because the Roman emperor wants to count each one. But it has been a long journey, and Mary is weary. Where will they sleep? They don't have a place to stay.

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There is room in the stable out back and they decide to make their bed where the animals make theirs.

Stars brighten slowly in the sky. All creation holds its breath.

SHEPHERDS

In the hills outside Bethlehem, shepherds watch their shadowy sheep.

All at once the dark is lost in light, and in the midst of the light is something even brighter, the faces of angels.

The fearful shepherds then hear singing in the sky, and a voice of an angel says, 'Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you good news of great joy, a joy to be shared by all people. Today in the City of David a savior is born. He is Christ the Lord.'

Then more angels appear, a whole heavenly host of them, praising God and singing: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all people everywhere.'

The shepherds run with joy across the fields to the barn behind the inn. There they find the Holy Family and creep forward, overwhelmed with mystery, to find Nativity itself in the center of all that love.

WISEMEN

Later, Three camels plod up the road to Bethlehem. They have come from the East, far beyond the Arabian desert, perhaps as far as the Caspian Sea. The camels carry the kings, the wise ones, the Magi. They are following the wild star, the destiny they had never seen before. They are following the star wherever it goes, to find the King- Its shining shows them the way. The Magi's journey ends in a different kind of King. Their restlessness rests at last. They fall on their knees and give him their gifts bright gold, sweet smelling frankincense, and bitter myrrh.

MOTION TO ALL:

So now we come, following the star to find God-with-us. We come as people have come all through the ages, to bring our gifts to this Child, God's gift to us.

Will you pray with me a repeat-after-me prayer? Dear God, Thank you for Jesus. Help us to learn the story of Jesus by heart. Help us to never forget it. Amen.

Magnify the Lord:

Luke 1:46b-55

46b My soul magnifies the Lord,

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

Magnify. Make greater.

Do you think that’s what KCRG TV in Eastern Iowa had in mind when they reported this season that Mike Zahs, an Iowa man has broken the world record for number of nativity sets- His collection of over 2600 sets began in the 1950s and has grown exponentially since. The displays come from more than 100 countries and are mostly handmade.

Or how about this interpretation of magnify the Lord? The world’s largest Christmas Nativity Scene resides in Alicante, Spain.

This year, the Three Wise Kings, represented by 52, 49 and 36 feet statues, will join Joseph (55 ½), Mary (33 feet) and Baby Jesus (11 feet) in the Guinness World Record for the biggest Christmas Nativity Scene.

Here’s another one: A very fast google search of a mid-priced Holy family for your yard could cost you the low low price of \$1400 for Baby Jesus, \$2100 for his lifesize kneeling Mother, \$2400 for Joseph looking over them.

I guess that’s magnifying the Lord? We might need to spend some time with Mary this morning to find another option for the application of her famous charge to us this Christmas Eve. There are four poems in the Bible which come from the mouths of women who play key roles in the lives of

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ancient Israel and Judah. They are Miriam, Deborah, Hannah and Mary. These mothers or stand-in mothers held in their arms and in their being, hope which grew into change in the history of their nations.

Miriam, the sister of Moses, sang to the Lord who had triumphed gloriously after bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. As the red sea closed with Pharaoh's army on one side and the Israelites on the other side she stopped and gave her song of praise.

Deborah's song was a victory hymn about the defeat of Canaanite adversaries by some of the tribes of Israel. She confidently names the ways in which the Lord saw her people through dark and uncertain times. Hannah's prayer was to rejoice over the birth of her son, Samuel whom she knew in her heart was going to change the course of history. Samuel grew to become a judge, a prophet and a priest- but Hannah sang first over her baby's life.

This morning, we hear Mary's song. It's called the Magnificat and it is similar to that of Hannah's. In light of what we know about the scene before us, it's Mary's voice we hear as she speaks boldly of the life her baby boy has been chosen to lead. She rejoices in God and she leads by example- "My soul Magnifies the Lord"- the beauty of that translation is lost a little for me- I see it more of "The very core of me magnifies the Lord"- the cumulation of who she is makes the Lord's name great, here. This is not a bottom shelf, "thank you, Lord", this is a life changing turning point, for her and for us.

MARY WOULD HAVE KNOWN

Here's the interesting connection for me: Mary would have known the song of Hannah. She would have trusted in the message of the story that started long ago. She would have known the song of Miriam and the deliverance of Moses. She could have described the turning point of Deborah's song.

Mary knew the history of these stories. Mary had an understanding of the way God had shown up in her life and now it is she who steps into faith that what the Angel had said to her would be true. In a moment of every tense emotion, she chose with her time to magnify the Lord. She made God's name great. She pointed out the steadfastness of God's mercy. She bowed to God's authority. She recognized that God, the God she has known from not only her own life but from her the story of God from the creation of the Earth, lifts up the lowly. Lowly not just in economic status, not just lowly as the lady who will give birth to Jesus outside of the main house... but lowly as the person who NEEDS God. Who wants a part of the inheritance of faithfulness.

This incredible sense of love for her child coupled with the deep trust and love for God pours from her very being. And she's speaking in future tense. Commentators always leave room for this odd turn of language and make a note that Mary speaks as if it's already happened. And here's my take on that. It's because she knows it's true and she knows it WILL BE true.

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Like when we tell someone, I'll love you then, too. Because we know it will be true.

She's been around the block enough times to have seen God's faithfulness over and over. She knows that while the way isn't clear to her, that it wasn't clear before and God made a way. She's holding this hope in her womb and she's stepping out on faith that God will make a way again.

Looking around this room and hearing the voices of our growing church family I know that you, too, have known the deep gratitude in your heart at the promise of a newborn. Whether you were the mother or father of the child, the grandparents, aunts and uncles or cousins of the child or whether your family only grows by way of your church family, the miracle and anticipation of a newborn feels like a miracle already.

I see you, I see us, gathered with much anticipation as we did our best to get our littles in their Christmas duds. I see the skirt that started out clean and before you walked in the door already had remnants on it of a breakfast you did not consume. I see your best tricks out of your bag and your arms full.

The message you need from this Christmas Eve morning is long but their attention spans are short. I see us. And it's here, in the middle of real life, in the reality of living, that Mary's words fall like manna over us.

And the task isn't just for someone else whose hands are more free. The task isn't just for someone who has a little bit more time on their schedule. The task isn't for those who have more energy to spread it.

Friends, growing generations to know the faithfulness of God is exactly where we want to be. We should want to jump up and volunteer first! I'll magnify the Lord! I'll be the one to tell of God's faithfulness!

Magnify the Lord

As you know, we had our church Nativity performance two weeks ago and I get to head up that endeavor and I've noticed a strange trend over the years. It's a rarity to want to be Mary in the program.

See, Mary doesn't really “do anything”. She doesn't get to carry in the frankincense nor does she get to tend the sheep. I'm here to make a case that indeed she does “do something” on the day she proclaimed her magnificat and every single day since.

This song is recorded in the most beautiful context that's worth digging into just a bit. We read from Luke that Jesus isn't the only baby who has been introduced by angels here. Zechariah and Elizabeth also had a holy birth announcement. But Zechariah, when he came face to face with Gabriel, doubted. Zechariah pointed out

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some obvious things to the angel Gabriel such as, “we are too old”, “SHE is too old!” So much so that Zechariah lost his voice for a period of time.

But Mary, Mary believed. Mary heard the wild and exhilarating announcement that a baby was on the way for her and she responded in the affirmative- “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

After that, Mary runs to her cousin Elizabeth’s house to talk about these new things happening in their lives and they spend three months together in the sisterhood of miracle conception.

We think of Mary as this lowly one who would have been meek and mild and maybe even frightened but the context of Mary is quite different- I see Mary as brave and confident as well as respectful and measured. After she had gathered her thoughts and considered the cost-THAT’S when she sang her song.

There’s something tender about the mother of Jesus believing in her son’s life when we know the rest of the story. We have the vantage point of having seen it through. We know that this baby will be the Messiah and for the record, so did she.

For most of us but not all of us, this is not our first Christmas. We know how the story goes.

You’ve seen God’s faithfulness. You trek back here to worship, you put the effort in every single time because you’ve known God’s work in your life and you believe that it’s for you. You know the song of Miriam, and Deborah. The prayers of Hannah and Mary. You’ve also born witness to the faithful in your own lives. God has seen you through your own variations of Exodus. God has stood with you in battles. God has given you hope and reason to believe anew.

Mary’s call to us is to respond in the affirmative. To join the generations of the faithful. And then to live into that faith. Magnify, not just in a “make bigger” way but to glorify, to praise.

Around here, I ask kids a lot of questions. How did Jesus stop the storm? How did Jesus heal the blind man? How did Jesus raise from the dead? And I often get a bold, quite confident answer. ****Magic****.

To which I say, “okay, I heard you say Magic, is there some other way?” Of course, children GET magic. They’ve been fine tuned to animation and beautiful and engaging storytelling about magic. The fantasy of magic is easy for them to wrap their minds around and they aren’t wrong that would sum up the situation.

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But when I ask you today, HOW DO WE MAGNIFY THE LORD? The answer is unequivocally NOT Magic. No, not magic.

The responsibility of carrying the message of God’s faithfulness, The work of pointing to the trustworthiness of God in the face of a world that is really really hard to remain hopeful....

The task of remaining strong in faith that is constantly challenged by the culture in which we live-----magnifying the lord is not glamorous, and anything but easy..

This world is not peaceful this morning as we are lifting up our offering of Noel, our communities are wracked with discourse and overwhelm isn’t far from the surface. But Mary’s incredible sense of love for her child coupled with the deep trust and love for God pours from her very being and lights the way.

The work of magnifying the Lord in our homes and in the promise that our children will write on their hearts is deep and challenging work. But it is timely.

There is no easy button on raising families who will know the story of God’s work in the world but here’s what I’ve got for you. Here’s what Mary’s got for you. Here’s what Hannah’s got for you.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

The deep and slow work of faithfulness is remembering the story that you know so well. It is magnifying the Lord in your life and in your home by pointing to the steadfast thread of hope that weaves it all together. It’s telling the story of God’s promise through faith and also in your own life. It’s the incredible love you have for the next generation and the deep trust and love you have for God. It’s in the traditions we hold in Advent. It’s in the story we tell of Christmas. It’s following the star to find God-with-us. This Christmas, let it come from your heart and your song, our gift to this child and God’s gift to us. Magnify the Lord! Amen and Amen.