

## **“An Audience of One”**

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Luke 1:46-55

Mary said,

“With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.

He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.

Surely, from now on, everyone will consider me highly favored  
because the mighty one has done great things for me.

Holy is his name.

He shows mercy to everyone,  
from one generation to the next,  
who honors him as God.

He has shown strength with his arm.

He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty.

He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,  
remembering his mercy,  
just as he promised to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to Abraham’s descendants forever.”

This is Mary’s song. Newly pregnant, journeying to visit her cousin Elizabeth – she sings of the greatness of God. She sings in trust and in hope for the justice God promises. Although Elizabeth and unnamed others hear Mary’s song, she is addressing it to God, to her Audience of One. “My soul magnifies the Lord,” she sings as she puts aside all that has weighed heavily on her in recent weeks. Family conflict and scandal pale in comparison to her Spirit-led need to glorify God.

Magnify seems like an old-fashioned term. We might say that to magnify God is to live your life in a way that makes God’s love for the world fuller and clearer to the people around you. To magnify God is to consistently reflect the light of God in our own corner of the world. In a word, it’s all about the ways in which we practice love-in-action. When we are facing challenges, when life presents us with a new reality, as it does Mary and

Joseph, our choice of response makes all the difference. Do we resist or run away? Or do we celebrate God's action in the life of the world?

If anyone knows what it means to celebrate God's love amid the unexpected, it is Mary. Facing the death of her dreams, she responds by rejoicing. We might say she does not know what she is in for but growing up in occupied Palestine, she can have few illusions. As we read her words it's good to remember that while they were written down to share with us, they are directed to her Audience of One.

When we celebrate this same One, we join with Mary and the multitude of saints who have gone before us and who will follow us, in singing of God's greatness. When we open ourselves to the Holy, when we live out the love that Jesus models, everything else falls into place. We find purpose.

Though the word is not popular these days, obedience describes this action. Obedience to God. We allow God as Spirit to permeate our lives. We watch and listen for God's presence – that small, still voice or hint of direction – and we follow this rather than the other voices that would call us toward false satisfaction. Obedience is seldom easy. Yet we find great models in Mary and Joseph.

We are so familiar with their story that the shock has gone out of it. An upright young woman finds herself pregnant. An upstanding man who could have her stoned does the "right" thing, choosing to give her back to her father, alive but shamed, never to marry, her child tainted by the disgrace.

We prepare for Christmas by decorating our homes, baking cookies and scrambling for last-minute presents to express our love. Preparations for that first Christmas were different. If we could have been a fly on the wall in that season, we would have heard Joseph's quiet meetings with Mary's father and a Temple lawyer. We'd have found Mary tossing in bed, wondering what will happen, wanting her old life back. We would have heard her singing her song into the bedding, trying to comfort herself. Joseph would also be tossing, feeling betrayed and embarrassed, the butt of jokes in the village.

Into this messiness, God shows up. God listens as Joseph vents about the unfairness of it all. And as Joseph runs out of words, he senses God's call for what will be the rest of his days: "I hear you, Joseph. Life is seldom fair. You're right. Now it's time to move on. I'm with you every step of the way."

We tend to sanitize Christmas, taking this story out of its context. But we can be sure that life does not get easier for Mary and Joseph. Their lives, like ours, are full of conflict and pain... and yet hope. Joseph and Mary are proof that what matters is not whether we are perfect. It's not about being good enough. We don't have to measure up.

What matters is Emmanuel – God-with-us. Always. Right here in the messiness of life, of hopes dashed and relationships ruined. Of course, Joseph and Mary have doubts, as we do. We wish our futures were clearer. We want comfort and peace. We long for our lives to matter yet fear letting go of our own agendas. We want to serve God but on our own terms.

So, we cross our fingers, hoping that everyone will behave this year – that the kids will sit quiet on Christmas Eve, that Uncle Ernie won't drink so much, that everyone will steer clear of talking politics and theology. But for all this, it is when we are hip-deep in embarrassing relatives, quarrelsome siblings, culinary catastrophes and unexpected meltdowns that God is most present with us.

We can learn from Mary's response to this unexpected change to her life's plan. She does not ask why, only how it will happen. Perhaps, this is a key to living in awe. Maybe we too need to cultivate an attitude of humility about the overwhelming aspects of life. Maybe we'd do well to practice more acceptance. Accept that God truly is present with us. When death's shadow hovers around the kitchen table. When we try to reconcile our relationships or our finances. When we do everything we can think of to hide from our feelings or fears. When we wipe the tears that won't be contained. If any of this resonates with the state of your life this December, hear and believe that God is present with you, right now.

Mary is the first person to respond to the Christmas story, but God invites us to be a part of the story too. When we choose to participate in it, we are called to make the hard choice to love. Strange wording, that, but I use it intentionally. Choosing to love is hard because loving this world, and loving others, requires something from us. Loving requires us to invest in others. It requires that we open up, that we give of ourselves. Truly loving requires that we accept that we will be changed.

As Christians, we are called to transform the world. That's a well-nigh impossible task. Yet we can do our best, working for justice, practicing mercy, praying for peace. And as we do, we come to learn an important truth: you can only create love in the world when you yourself are filled with God's love, when you let God work on you, and in you and through you. When we are serious about preparing for the coming of Christ, we are altered. Inside our being, we notice a change as love fills us. Our actions and words reflect this as love-in-action. Who can say what will be the effect when we show God's love in all its fullness?

We are a people who spend four odd weeks each year preparing for the One who is yet to come and letting ourselves be transformed in the process. And we have something to share with the world – we learn from Mary.

No matter what is happening around us, between us, or within us, we are called to live love. We are asked to trust and to celebrate our Audience of One. We are urged to open our hearts and to love the world as God does.

Christmas, at its best, happens all the time. The Christmas story continues to play out as we each accept an invitation to join the story. So, as we prepare for Christmas Eve in a few days, my hope is that you will accept your role in this drama and that you will live out Christmas. My hope is that the role you accept will be of one transformed by God's love who now seeks to transform the world.

God will be with you. That's the meaning of Emmanuel. God with us, today and in all our tomorrows, whoever and whatever we are. With us.