

Magnifying God  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
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“Magnifying God” Pilgrim Church UCC, December 21, 2014—Fourth Sunday of Advent (Luke 1:46b-55)

“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”

“In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility—I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it. And the glow from that fire can truly light the world.”

“So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life, a leadership of frankness and of vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory.”[1]

“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. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”[2]

Whether we’re hearing the sweeping words of Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, or Mary, the power of the spoken word shines through. Excellent public addresses, speeches, sermons, lectures have a way of staying with us and lasting the test of time. This morning, we heard Julia read stirring words from Mary, a young Jewish girl who recently found out that God will do a new thing through her. Mary glorifies God in our story and announces that the wrongs of history will be made right. God already has and will bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly—just like Mary herself! It’s an epic speech about reversals and God acting with justice, liberating the powerless.

Before we go further though, let’s talk about the Virgin Birth as this is a central idea in Mary’s story. It’s a rather interesting faith claim in modernity, what we truly believe about the Christmas narrative we hear every December. Mary’s Magnificat appears right after the Angel Gabriel announced that she found favor with God and would bear a son, naming him Jesus. What do we make of the Virgin Birth?

To shed a little light on current popular religious thinking about Mary, we can turn to the good folks at the Pew Research Center who conduct studies on American religion. On Tuesday, Pew reported results from a poll they conducted from December 3-7 of this year about what American Christians truly believe about the Christmas story. Pew found that 65% of American adults believe in the four primary elements of the Christmas story—the virgin birth, an angel announcing the birth of Jesus to shepherds, the magi following a star to bring gifts to Jesus, and that Jesus was laid in a manger.[3]

It’s even more interesting when one can review Pew’s results for each individual question. The question about the Virgin Birth was phrased: “Do you believe that Jesus Christ was born to a virgin, or don’t you believe this?” How would you respond to that question? It ends up that among Mainline Protestants like us, the response was 85% yes—Jesus was born to a virgin

and it only gets higher from there when you see how Roman Catholics and Evangelical Protestants responded.[4] This is fascinating!

Though in stereotypical Mainline Protestant fashion, I began dissecting the sentence the Pew researchers posed. Thinking that the Greek word we translate into English as “virgin” (parthenos) can also mean young woman or maiden, as in someone of child-bearing age who isn’t married. And “believe” doesn’t necessarily mean attesting to historical factual authenticity, it can be about accepting something as actually true but not factually true. Some scholars say that the Biblical usage of the word “believing” is more about trusting! Basically, I began scrutinizing the sentence from the Pew Research Center and the miracle and became very Grinch-like in a matter of minutes.

But then I recalled one of the best illustrations I’ve ever heard for helping modern, smart, sometimes skeptical folks be able to get into the most miraculous stories of our tradition with our heads and our hearts intact. And it’s worth hearing again.

Religion Scholar Phyllis Tickle once spoke about miracles as actually true but not necessarily factually true. Tickle was leading an Adult Education class at a church during Advent and there’d been a church dinner beforehand. A few youth were in the kitchen cleaning up as she was teaching the Christmas story. She noticed one teenage boy who seemed to get slower and slower in his cleaning duties because he was intently listening to the conversation.

At the same time, the adults present were challenging Tickle to explain the Virgin Birth, asking her to tell them the story without it appearing miraculous. A good conversation ensued about how we wrestle with faith claims like the Virgin Birth when we’ve developed a more mature, adult faith. How do we reconcile texts like this that could make us uncomfortable and leave us full of doubt? That’s what the conversation was about with various views getting thrown out—all the way from having to accept it all literally to claiming that the entire thing is a metaphor so let’s stop pretending that we believe these miracle stories are true.

As the adults were leaving, the teenager who scrubbed that pot clean came up to Phyllis Tickle. He looked quite troubled as he asked her—what in the world were all those adults talking about? With absolute awe and wonder on his face, he told this renowned Christian scholar that the story of Mary and the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ “is so beautiful, it has to be true, whether it actually happened or not.”[5]

God bless that teenager. This season of miracles will be lost on us if we can’t follow the Christmas Star and the message of the Angels to the Shepherds living in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night. This season of miracles will be lost on us if we don’t allow our hearts to lead the way to that child lying in a manger. If we can’t open ourselves enough to see the beauty and the meaning and the symbolism and the truth in these stories, we simply won’t understand. Like the Grinch, our small hearts can grow three sizes, but our hearts have to be leading the conversation.

The deeper meaning, the truth of Mary’s story? Mary responds in Luke’s Gospel to the news of the birth of Jesus (however we define her as a “virgin”) with this absolutely stunning song of praise to God. It’s so beautiful, it has to be true, whether it actually happened or not. Mary is probably around 13 years old at the time since the age of betrothal in the Jewish tradition was twelve and a half. She praises God for even having a role to play in this new thing God is about to do.

In some ways, Mary is calling on us to be agents of change in the world. Mary’s Magnificat points out all the ways that we set ourselves apart from one another—pride, power, food, wealth. Is it so different today? Yet we’re all called to see God in one another and work for

justice for all people. It's been a hard year—with Ebola affecting many people in West African countries, the events of Ferguson and New York and Cleveland and the call that black lives matter, the CIA torture report, the violence at the school in Pakistan, the rabbis killed in Jerusalem, the conflict in Ukraine and Syria and the threat of ISIS. We can't shield ourselves from the world.

Mary's song of praise may be even more powerful today considering the chaos it feels like we're in all the time. God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. God has helped God's people, in remembrance of God's mercy.[6]

Do we always see this happening? Of course not. But Mary reminds us that God acts in mercy and that the people who anger God are those who show no love and no justice. For if we truly see each other as God sees us, then we begin to act with compassion. How can we not?

The ethics of God's realm don't always match the ethics of our societies and governmental policies. Mary reminds us that God calls on us to raise up and bless the poor, the weak, and the hungry and work to change what makes people poor, weak, and hungry in the first place. The Mighty One has done great things for Mary. Who's to say God can't or hasn't or isn't doing great things for us?

At the end of the day, the Virgin Birth is a matter of faith that can't be proven as historical fact. Miracles just don't work that way. Instead, Mary's story—including the Magnificat, her epic song of praise to God, shows that God acts in our lives. Sometimes we just have to trust that God's love is at work, even if we can't always see it. It's so beautiful, it has to be true. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, *American Rhetoric: Top 100 Speeches*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/top100speechesall.html>

[2] Luke 1:46b-49.

[3] Antonia Blumberg, "73 Percent of Americans Believe Jesus Was Born to a Virgin," *The Huffington Post*, December 16, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/16/belief-in-christmas-story\\_n\\_633...](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/16/belief-in-christmas-story_n_633...)

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Phyllis Tickle, Lecture at Woodbury Workshop at Andover Newton Theological School, February 1, 2013.

[6] Luke 1:52-54.