

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
22 December 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Fourth Sunday of Advent

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Magnify What Matters”

Part of the Annual theme, *Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD*
Touchstone words in Advent: WAIT and CULTIVATE

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Luke 1:39-55

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

You never know what a day will bring. Think about the last time you had one of Those Days. A Day when some kind of news came upon you unasked for and unexpected and rocked your world and upended your life. A day when there is Before That Moment and After That Moment. What I’m most interested about those types of days is not the Moment the News came, per se but all the ordinary moments before it. The “regular-day-ness” of it all.

Imagine young Mary on the day before Gabriel flew into her life and told her she was pregnant with the Son of God (no biggie). Her life is never the same after that moment. But before? She was just living her life. Probably woke up and did her morning chores, went off to visit Joseph at work for a bit, then on her way home to help her mom start dinner, she stopped by the well to draw some water some water and chat with a few friends; it

was just an ordinary day. Until the extraordinary happened.

And while it’s true that Mary, upon learning of her pregnancy, responded in one of the most faithful, spiritual ways ever, “*Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word,*” (Luke 1:38)—let’s be real about what happens next: *she runs right out of town!*

And I love this specific moment of decision in Mary’s story. Because while she had a Big Yes to God’s Big Invitation in her life, what feels more relatable is the NEXT moment; the moment when she says, “*Wait a minute, what just happened? What did I just say yes to? What I do next?...*” Her mind is racing and what does she do? She races to her cousin Elizabeth’s house.

What mattered to Mary in that moment was going to see someone who would see her. Who would listen. Who might understand fully, but would at least try to understand.

She could have stayed alone in her swirling thoughts of excitement and fear and wonder and worry, but she didn't. In going to see Elizabeth, **Mary magnified companionship** in the midst of this huge confusing, complex life-changing event.

Our minds will always race and make the “unknown” bigger and scarier than it needs to be. We will loop over fear-filled thoughts like a record on repeat and we can google ourselves into a blackhole of information if we want, but perhaps what we learn from Mary in this moment of upheaval and change is to magnify (increase, enlarge, amplify) companionship when our instinct might be to retreat.

This is one of the greatest gifts of community. That there are people in these pews, people worshipping online, who have had a similar experience to what you might be experiencing for the first time. Maybe not the exact same experience, but something relatable. Someone here at Calvary might be your

Elizabeth, if you just have the courage to share what's happening in your life out loud with someone else, instead of trying to deal with it by yourself. And even more importantly, YOU can be someone else's Elizabeth. Never think that your life experience doesn't matter. It does. And when you hear of someone else going through something that resonates with your journey, perhaps open your heart, just as Elizabeth opened her door for Mary—not magnifying or centering your own experience making it all about you, but simply using your experience as the lens through which you offer empathy, compassion, and companionship.

In a study from the Harvard Graduate School of Education published in October of this year “Loneliness in America: Just the tip of the Iceberg?” we learned that 21% of us (1 in every 5 people) is living with loneliness. Of those who experience loneliness on a regular basis, 81% report depression or anxiety, 75% report having little meaning or purpose in their life, 67% feel they are not part of a meaningful group, 61% report a lack of close friends or family, 40% feel they are not “part of this country

anymore,” and 65% experience existential loneliness, meaning they feel fundamentally disconnected from the world or their place in the world does not feel important or relevant. When people who are lonely are asked what they think contributes to their loneliness, 73% say technology, 66% say it’s that their family and friends don’t spend enough time together, 62% say it’s because they’re working too much or are too busy or exhausted.¹ And you know what this fancy study from Harvard found out? The antidote to loneliness is intentional in-person connection. Go figure.

What was true for young Mary, 2,000+ years ago, is true for us today: intentionally **magnifying companionship matters**. It is an essential gift of the incarnation: Emmanuel (God-with-us). Person to person human connection.

And what was true for an older, wiser Elizabeth 2,000+ years ago, is true for us today as well: **magnifying our blessings matters too**.

When Elizabeth’s own in utero child leaps in her womb upon seeing Mary—which is the first prophetic act of John the Baptist who would later pave the way for Jesus with his ministry—Elizabeth interprets this leaping child within her, that kick within her belly, as the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth understands, with a little help from son within her womb, that this is a God moment. A spirit filled moment. And she doesn’t miss it! She knows this is a moment for her to uplift and encourage young Mary.

And here’s the thing. Elizabeth has lived a long life. She’s been around the block a few times. She’s not naïve. I think she knows good and well that her own pregnancy and Mary’s are going to be difficult (for different reasons), but she knows the road ahead isn’t smooth, *especially* for Mary. People are going to gossip and talk. Joseph will be jealous and her parents may shame her. Mary herself might even feel imposter syndrome, feeling inadequate for this great responsibility. And yet, rather than dwelling on the what ifs, and the fears, and the negative

¹ Milena Batanova, Richard Weissbourd, and Joseph McIntyre, “Loneliness in America: Just the Tip of the Iceberg,” Harvard Graduate School of Education

(October 2024), accessed on Dec. 22, 2024 at <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/loneliness-in-america-2024>.

aspects of what this experience could be—Elizabeth chooses this moment to magnify blessing for Mary—in two different ways.

First she says, “*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb,*” (Luke 1:42) The Greek word used for blessing here is *eulogeō* (yoo-log-eh-o), meaning to praise or celebrate, to speak well of, to ask God’s blessing upon.² Yes, it’s the same root as the word, Eulogy. We give eulogies to praise someone’s life, to highlight their positive characteristics and impact.

Later, in verse 45, Elizabeth says, “*And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord,*” (Luke 1:45). In this verse, the word for blessing in the Greek is *Makarios* (ma-car-i-os), which means “happy.” It’s the same ‘blessed’ that Jesus will later use as he teaches the Beatitudes, “*Blessed or Happy (content) are the poor in the spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,*” (Matt. 5:3)

In the first word of blessing, *eulogeō*, Elizabeth is praising Mary and highlighting this good news in her life, as well as almost making a pronouncement of blessing upon her, almost like a prayer for God’s blessing, just as a benediction at the end of the service is a “good word,” or a “blessing” upon people. In the second Greek word for blessing, *makarios*, Elizabeth is almost giving advice to Mary, saying “*You will be blessed, or you will be happy/content when you believe the fulfillment of what the Lord has spoken to you,*” (Luke 1:45).

I love the nuances in this exchange. Because it’s not that Elizabeth is saying this is the most wonderful thing that has happened to Mary. No. She’s praising Mary first, uplifting her saying, “*you’ve got this, you can handle this big responsibility; you have what it takes, you have the strength and humility and curiosity and wisdom to carry the Son of God within you*” It’s exactly the kind of “pump it up” speech we all need when we are facing a big situation. Elizabeth is praising her younger cousin. She’s highlighting all the great things

² Strong’s definition, accessed on Dec. 22, 2024 at <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2127/kjv/tr/0-1/>.

about her that make her well suited for this big task. She focuses on the blessings and gifts Mary already has within her to handle this, *not* on the weaknesses or faults that Mary has that may make it a bit harder.

And then, she gives straight up advice with the second form of blessing. Saying, you can deal with this one of two ways. If you doubt that you are up for this task or if you doubt that this is what God is doing in your life, then you won't be happy. But if you believe what God is up to in your life, and believe that it's where you are supposed to be right now even if you don't understand why, you'll be happy, or *makarios*, blessed/content. You might surprise yourself, even in the midst of a mess, what leaning into God can do for you.

With all of her wisdom and life experience, Elizabeth makes a choice in this moment to focus on the positive for Mary. She doesn't outline all the things that could go wrong or all the ways this is scary. She praises and uplifts Mary, encourages her. And then she reminds Mary that Mary has a choice in this moment to lean into what God is doing, and find

blessing/happiness, OR she can run away from this and question it or doubt it and probably always struggle to find happiness, or contentment.

When we focus on the negative of one circumstance in our life, it tends to color how we experience other things in our life as well. But when we can focus our energies on the positive, when we magnify the good, it makes all the difference. If not in what is happening to us, then at least in the perspective we have as we try to make meaning of what is happening to us.

This is not to say that Elizabeth is not also the person that Mary can vent to or complain to along the way when stuff gets hard. But somehow Elizabeth knows that this is not *that* moment. **THIS** moment is about magnifying Blessing. Not magnifying the What Ifs, or I Can't's. Mary needs to know she Can do this and she Will do it. And Mary needs to be reminded that God is in the mix and to trust that though she may not understand this all now...one day she just might. But Now is not the moment to try to understand it or make meaning of it, Now is the

moment to accept it, embrace it, and live it.

The acknowledgement of blessing does not automatically banish fear or worry or doubt. The acknowledgement of blessing roots us in our belovedness, which is the perspective shift that helps us endure even the most difficult experiences with deeper and greater love.

In stressful, life-changing moments, in moments of wonder and fear and awe, in seasons of transition and waiting and living in the Unknown, magnifying blessing matters. Looking for things to be grateful for—no matter how small they may seem—matters. Looking for where God is in the mix of it all matters. And when we can't see any blessings ourselves, a that's when a companion can help us.

Mary magnifies companionship by going to Elizabeth. Elizabeth magnifies blessing by uplifting Mary. And then. *Then*, Mary's soul magnifies the Lord. Mary has been seen and heard by a friend, she has been reminded that she herself is a blessing and that there is a blessing for her in this experience as she leans in fully, and trusts God, and then,

...I think it's because both of those things have happened, that she is able to burst out in song and magnify God.

The word for magnify in the Greek here is *megalynō* (meg-aloo-no) meaning enlarge, make great, make conspicuous (or easy to see), to deem, declare great, esteem highly, laud or celebrate.

The song that Mary sings, the *Magnificat*, which is Latin for “Magnifies” or “My Soul Magnifies the Lord,” is mostly about the past, even though the context is the present. In the present tense verbs, in the here and now, Mary is 1) praising, magnifying the Lord, 2) her spirit is rejoicing in God, 3) she's saying the name of the Lord is ‘holy’ (or set apart, sacred) and 4) she's saying God's mercy (*eleos* in Greek, meaning compassion) is for those who fear (meaning, revere) God, who treat God with reverence. That's it. That is what Mary is able to sing of in the “here and now”—the presence of God in her life, the holiness of God, her reverence for God and God's compassion, and how her soul feels as she thinks about God...which is larger, more full, more open, more expansive.

None of that is about Mary's actual situation or her personal, detailed, circumstances. In this moment, Mary is all about magnifying the presence of God in her life; the place of God in her situation. She's centering God, rather than centering the specific details of her dilemma or even her new found 'divine calling.' Mary uses this moment to magnify God, not herself or her worries.

Those who practice centering prayer, know this experience. Of focusing on the warmth, light, and presence of the divine within and around you and in the world, **RATHER** than listing off prayer requests or needs or concerns or gratitudes. Both kinds of prayer have their place, but sometimes—what is needed is for us to stop, pause, and just remember that God is God and we are God's beloved. God is the loving presence that we are to magnify and focus on. And in doing so, somehow we gain perspective about what matters and perhaps feel a wash of peace come over us and some of the fears that can hold us so tightly start to loosen their grip.

When we do not treat God like a "fix it man" or a "vending machine of solutions," but

rather remember that God is a loving presence of compassion and ever-nearness...it changes a lot. It allows us to live through uncertainty with the certainty that we are not alone and that we are held in love.

And once we magnify *this* truth, we are ready to truly magnify what matters most as we move from the personal to the communal—focusing on the most marginalized who are at the center of God's kin-dom.

Through her song Mary reminds us of God's faithfulness in the past. Through her song, Mary reminds us that the God who has scattered the proud, the God who has brought down the powerful from their thrones, the God who has lifted up the lowly, the God who sent the rich away empty and filled the hungry with good things, the God who has made promises in the past...that God can (and will) keep and continue those promises by embodying them in the person of Jesus and in you and me. It truly is what the incarnation is all about. God's Love becoming real with human flesh.

Reading about the proud being scattered, the powerful being brought down from their

thrones, and the rich being sent away empty—is timely given that President-elect Donald Trump—who campaigned on the idea that he would “rescue our middle class” and fight for the average American—has chosen billionaires to help shape his administration.³

While wealth is an issue in all of our politics, at all levels and in both major parties, it’s heightened even more right now because, “The new cabinet and department nominees constitute the wealthiest collection of humanity ever appointed to important positions of public trust.”⁴ All together, the billionaires tapped for the Trump administration are worth at least \$383 billion—higher than the GDP of 172 countries.⁵ For comparison, this is roughly 100 times richer than President Biden’s cabinet,⁶ which was still really, really rich at \$118 million.⁷

Reporter Tim Murphy wrote, “Let’s just get it out of the way upfront, Donald Trump is assembling a government of

billionaires, the likes of which the United States has never seen.”⁸ These positions include fifteen billionaires (16 if you include Trump himself)—with Elon Musk at the helm, who alone is worth \$400 billion, and who might be the richest person to ever live in all of human history. “While it’s common for people with careers in business to serve in government...ultra-rich individuals with complex financial backgrounds and previous business dealings raise concerns about potential conflicts of interest. *‘Being wealthy by itself is not a disqualifier,’* said Kedric Payne, senior director of Ethics at Campaign Legal Center, formerly deputy chief counsel of the Office of Congressional Ethics. *‘It’s just simply the potential conflicts of interest that are the concern [and how do deal with all the people that will need to divest of different interests in such a short amount of time]. [Wealth complicates public trust, raising questions*

³ Laura Mannweiler, “All the President’s Billionaires: The Extraordinary Wealth in Trump’s Proposed Administration,” *US News & World Report* (10 December 2024), accessed on Dec. 22, 2024 at <https://www.usnews.com/news/national->

⁴ Diana Butler Bass, “Sunday Musings: Advent 4: Cast Down the Mighty,” *The Cottage* (22 Dec. 2024), accessed on Dec. 22, 2024 at dianabutlerbass@substack.com.

⁵ Mannweiler, *ibid.*

⁶ Tim Murphy, “Trump’s Billionaire Cabinet is Unprecedented,” *Mother Jones* (18 Dec. 2024), accessed on Dec. 22, 2024 at <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2024/12/trumps-billionaire-cabinet-is-unprecedented/>.

⁷ Mannweiler, *ibid.*

⁸ Murphy, *ibid.*

about the ethics of what we value and WHO we value.]”⁹

What are we Christians to make of this reality in our country as we seek for our souls to join Mary’s in magnifying the Lord? Well, in magnifying the presence of God, we also must magnify the people whom God magnifies: the poor, the humble, the hungry.

In Mary’s song, this truth is magnified. Christian scholar Diana Butler Bass writes, “Jesus came into the world to defeat the powers and principalities that had set themselves up as gods—and who established their kingdoms and empires in place of the Dream of God. Peace on earth means casting off every [ruler] who believes himself to be god. Peace on earth means an end to their schemes...Christmas resists the oligarchs and billionaires who control and destroy. They will fail, but they will still try...Their power is a deadly delusion, a deceitful corruption, and the fantasy of their own wounds and insecurities. They are on the wrong side of this sacred Christmas story.”¹⁰

And yet. They are still included in the Christmas story, aren’t they? That is the Good News. That it’s for everyone. No exceptions. The rich and powerful are not cast out, they are cast down. At Christmas, we’re reminded that the only way to truly magnify God and who God magnifies is to get down and get eye-level with the manger.

And there at the manger, “At Mary’s side, we midwife this gleaming truth. That the poor and lowly are the [first] heirs of the Kingdom, [not the wealthy or war hungry]. The corruption of the elites will be made right. Justice is coming...”¹¹

The Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, who is the founder and president of Dar-al Kalima University, the first and only university of arts and culture in all of Palestine, shared this reflection with those of us who are clergy and support him as part of his Faith Leaders’ Advisory Council. It is a powerful word from one who could easily magnify Fear instead of Love. He essentially said (and I’m paraphrasing here):

⁹ Jose Luis Magana, “Trump has tapped an unprecedented 13 billionaires for his administration. Here’s who they are,” ABC News (17 Dec. 2024), accessed on Dec. 22, 2024 at

<https://abcnews.go.com/US/trump-tapped-unprecedented-13-billionaires-top-administration-roles/>.

¹⁰ Butler Bass, *ibid*

¹¹ Butler Bass, *ibid*.

“Greetings from the “Little Town of Bethlehem. Will you please remind your people that in this little town of Bethlehem nothing is peaceful or still or quiet? As your children sing peacefully in their Christmas programs, “O Little Town of Bethlehem” please remember that bombs are dropping on our children in Bethlehem.

Mitri gave concrete statistics and examples: “The fears of our Palestinian people in Gaza are beyond comprehension. Half of the population in Gaza are children. Most of these children have been through five wars in addition to the current ongoing genocide in only 16 years. A child that was born in 2007 experienced the first Israeli assault when he was two years old, the second when he was five, the third when he was seven, the fourth and fifth when he was a teenager of fourteen/fifteen years old, and at age 16 the current genocide. Such a child saw his home bombed, his sibling murdered in airstrikes, his neighborhood in rubble. He has been displaced twelve times and can’t sleep from the constant sounds of drones, airstrikes, and shelling.

We had a university campus in Gaza. It was destroyed by an Israeli airstrike during Holy week this year. We have 36 staff, all of them displaced. They refuse to surrender to fear. They are determined to do something against the fear, the trauma, the depression. They volunteer daily reaching out to the thousands of displaced children around them with art therapy programs so that the children can heal, at least partially.”¹²

“The experience of our volunteers in Gaza opened for me a new understanding of “Do not be afraid!” Jesus came to save us from fears that paralyze us. Does this mean that we are saved from trouble and wars? Not at all. We will still pass through troubled water, but when we pass through troubled waters, he will be there with us and for us so that the powerful rivers will not overwhelm us. We will continue to experience fire, yet when we walk through fire the flame shall not consume us. God makes us resilient.

“Do not be afraid, I will make you resilient!” “Do not be

¹² Email from Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb to the Bright Starts of Bethlehem Faith Leaders Advisory Council in December 2024.

afraid, a savior is born!” Savior stands for liberator. The angels promised liberation and freedom for a people under Roman occupation. Our people are asking for nothing more than freedom and liberation from occupation.”¹³

When will those who say they worship and follow the Prince of Peace demand a ceasefire for peace in the land of his birth?

You see, Mary magnifies what matters when she magnifies the Lord. But the Lord, our God, the incarnate Christ, is not a mystical being detached from real-world outcomes and implications. If we are magnifying God, we are magnifying God’s values, God’s compassion, God’s love. If we magnify the Lord, then we magnify the needs and voices of the poor, the lowly, the hungry, the occupied and oppressed, and we when we de-throne and de-centralize the power and voices of the rich, the powerful, the proud.

In this way, when Mary begins her song, the text pivots from the personal to the communal, from the circumstances of our own situation to the global

needs of the entire world. To magnify what matters is to make room for both and know that God makes room for the very personal parts of our lives, and deeply about the larger-than-life problems of the world.

When we magnify Jesus’ life, his words, actions, and love, that will motivate us to align our lives, our generosity, our faith, our activism, our compassion with the poor, the needy, the marginalized, the sick, the grieving, the orphaned, the refugee.

When our souls magnify what matters, we magnify the Prince of Peace, *Emmanuel*, God-with-us. We magnify the Christ who born not just in Bethlehem back then, but in us today, the One who cultivates within us compassion, justice, peace, and an imagination for the new world order about which Mary sings.

Cultivating the values of Christ does not happen overnight, or even in nine months. It is lifelong. And it is a daily practice of drawing our focus away from what distracts, and choosing to magnify what matters most.

¹³ Raheb, *ibid.*

I love how poet, Lynn Ungar,
draws us into this mystery and
and love alongside Mary. This is
her poem entitled, *Magnificat*:

My soul doth magnify the Lord
*said Mary, under circumstances
which make it something of a
startling
utterance. Not I accept the will of the
Lord.
Not I bow before the Lord.
Not even I give thanks to the Lord.
No, Mary, this young woman,
presumably unfamiliar with angels
or divine voices of any kind,
let alone those pronouncing
that salvation would grow inside
her ordinary flesh — this woman
who may be innocent, but hardly
seems naïve —
says something remarkable.*
My soul magnifies the Lord.
*Who I am, what I do, how I choose
makes God bigger. As if God
were to slip between microscope
slides
and appear in never-before-seen
detail.
Which is, of course, exactly
what happens. Somehow,
in being magnified God gets small,
small enough to sleep amongst the
straw
and the scent of farm animals.
God magnified becomes particular,
tangible, urgent as a hungry child.
And Mary, like so many women
before her and after, puts the baby
to her breast, where they both grow
vast in one another's eyes.*¹⁴

This Christmas, may we get eye
level with the manger and
magnify what (or WHO) matters
most—the Christ Child in Jesus
and the Christ in EVERY child,
worldwide.

Amen.

¹⁴ Buter Bass, *ibid*. Also found on Lynn Ungar's
Facebook page on a post from December 14, 2019.