

Sermon – December 11, 2022
Pastor Dan Hollis
Luke 1:46-53

Our reading today is commonly called the “Magnificat.” Just like Genesis is called Genesis because its first word, “Genesis,” is simply Greek for “In the beginning,” we call this reading the Magnificat because in Latin the first word of Mary’s prayer is “Magnificat.”

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.” This hymn or song or poem is attributed to Mary, the woman who would give birth to Jesus, and it’s one of comparatively few times that the Bible allows a woman to speak for herself.

So of course now you have to listen to a *male* pastor preach about it. Sorry about that. I could have asked Pat Smith to preach this Sunday instead, but Pastor Eric just did a month-long sermon series and I have to earn my supper around here somehow. Just, uh, Streaming Team, whatever you do, please *don’t* put the words “Mansplaining the Magnificat” up on screen for our viewers at home.

The Magnificat takes place after Mary, a young unmarried girl in the ancient near east, heard the surprising news that she was going to give birth to Jesus, the Son of the Most High... and I just want to highlight it for you today, and to share with you something that it inspires in me. Because Mary’s words are recorded here for *all* of us, and they *should* have an impact on those who read and hear them.

When I hear these words, I can feel Mary’s joy pouring through them. **In Mary’s plight *and* Mary’s joy, I think we all should be reminded to seek joy—even irrational joy—in the face of rational challenges.**

There’s kind of a medical myth out there that I know I as a man was perfectly happy believing was completely scientifically accurate. It’s the idea that there’s like this chemical in the brain that makes one forget or lessen the memory of the pain of childbirth, otherwise you’d never want to have a second child. Now, I got curious, and after reading research and interviews conducted by women, it seems like it’s... not as much of a universal experience as that.

I’m definitely *not* gonna ask for a show of hands about who here vividly remembers or doesn’t remember the pain of childbirth, but as far as it goes, there’s no scientific consensus on some sort of childbirth-forgetfulness chemical, and anecdotally, it’s a mixed bag.

As Dr. Jennifer Conti puts it, “I often hear women say that they can remember that they were in pain during labor, but can’t actually recall the perception or intensity that well. On the other hand, there are women who swear they remember the event like it happened yesterday.”

And yet, whoever forgets the pain or remembers it vividly, there are plenty of them out there who *still* want to have that second child. The *joy* of that experience *overcomes* all its negatives—and I’m including in the negatives the cost of diapers, minivans, and student loans.

Now this was Mary’s *first* child... but she had *plenty* of negatives, challenges, and reasons *not* to be joyful in her situation. She was a teenager, perhaps even as young as thirteen, betrothed but not married in a culture that ostracized unmarried mothers, prized virginity, and demonized sex outside of wedlock.

She and her fiancée were not wealthy by any definition, and there was a good chance—and precedent—that her husband would leave her (“dismiss” her) the second he learned she was pregnant, not to mention what her family and society might do.

On top of all that, two thousand years ago the rates of infant mortality and lethal complications were very high, which would have been enough to worry anyone *regardless* of marital status.

So Mary had every rational reason to be terrified, confused, upset, and angry at God. And yet, with all that roaring around her head... what we see in our reading, *irrationally*, is joy.

With every word, we see how *glad* she is for what has been placed upon her. We see how grateful she is for the blessings of God, and we see her joy at the promise Jesus’ birth represents.

The joy she has found eclipses all the real-world fear and struggle that she has been dropped in the middle of... and I hope that’s as inspiring to you as it is to me. I look up to Mary, because of her ability to find that joy in the midst of challenges and difficulties that... I can barely even *begin* to imagine.

We should all of us feel inspired to find the joy of the Magnificat, in the midst of the trials and sorrows that we face.

Now, Mary had an angel show up on her doorstep and tell her how blessed and beloved she was by God, and that her son “will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” You might think there’s no comparison between her and you. I mean, Mary’s life may be a little complicated for the next nine months or so, but then it all works out in the end, right? How can *we* be expected to find her kind of joy,

when our struggle or our sorrow *doesn't* have an expiration date? Well I'll remind you that being the mother of Jesus also meant that she would one day be standing at Golgotha watching her son die on the cross. Her pain didn't have an expiration date either.

And *still* there was joy.

I watched an incredible piece of television recently, a show called "The Haunting of Bly Manor," and in it, one of the characters said this line that will stick with me forever:

"To truly love another person is to accept the work of loving them is worth the pain of losing them."

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The *pain* was worth the *joy*. For Mary, the struggle was *dwarfed* by the joy. And I'm not just talking about the joy of having a child, because that's not a joy all of us will be able to have or perhaps even want to have in our lives. It's also not the *only* joy that has that power to eclipse the sorrows we get mired in.

We see in her very words just how many things Mary had to be joyful about. She *knew*, as lowly as she was in station and situation, that God was looking upon her with favor. She *recognized* she had a legacy to leave that would impact the lives of so many to come. She had *faith* God would do great things for her and through her. And she was a *witness* to the fact that God's blessing for her—the birth of Jesus—was also a blessing to others.

Because she knew from the angel that her son would take up the throne of David and be the Son of God, she knew with joy that God's promises for the world were being fulfilled.

To her, the birth of that Son of God meant good news for the lowly and the hungry... and it meant a rude awakening for the powerful and the obscenely wealthy, all those who would look *down* on a woman like her, and who were *responsible* for the injustices she faced. Jesus himself has that same realization just two chapters later at his baptism, when a voice from heaven tells him, "You are my Son, the Beloved," and he goes on to bless and be a blessing for all those who are poor, hungry, and mournful, all while preaching woe to those who *have* what others do *not*... right up to the day of his death.

In the depths of her struggles, Mary envisioned a reversal, where her pain turned to joy... *and* where the son she bore would turn her world—where each man is out to amass just as *much* as he can get his hands on—into a Christian world, where no man *dares* to have too much while others like her have too little.

If Mary can envision such a reversal in *her* circumstances... so can *we*. However serious, or real, or painful your struggles are or become, and however *rational* it would be to succumb to fear, despair, or rage... I hope Mary and her Magnificat can inspire you to seek, find, and know *joy*.

Like Mary, I want you to *know* that God looks upon you with favor. I want you to *recognize* the impacts you make on the people around you and that you may right now be leaving behind legacies that you'll never see with your own eyes. I want you to have *faith* that God is doing and will do great things for you and through you. And I want you to be a *witness* to God's blessings, big and small.

Find the joy. *Find* it. And may it transform your pain... to rejoicing.

Amen.