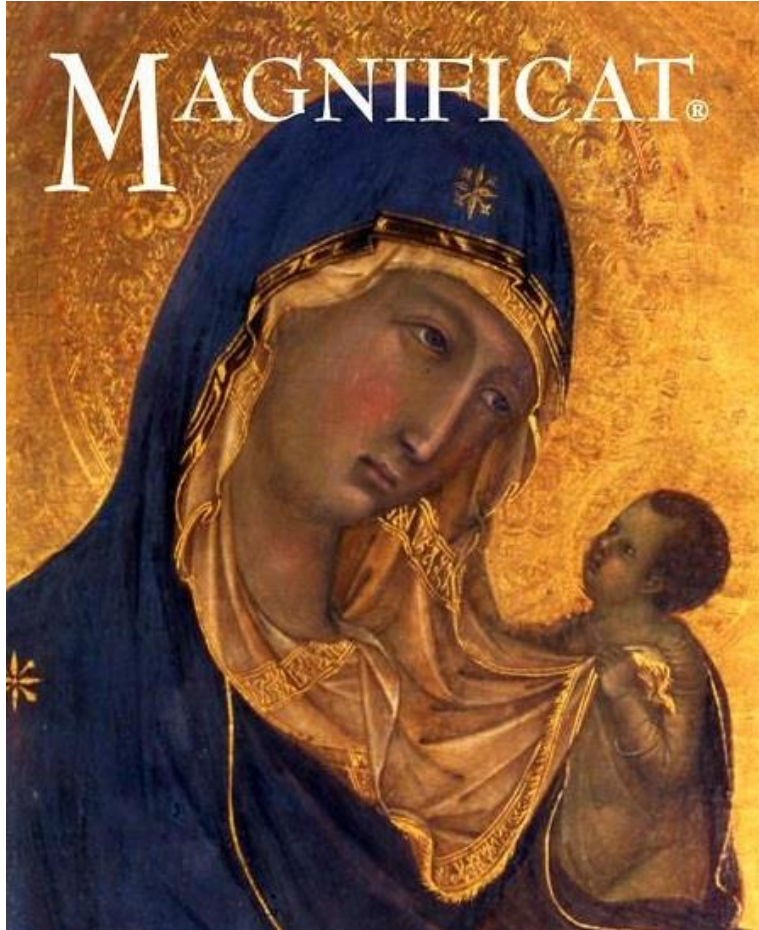


## Magnificat



The Gospel of Luke 1:46 "And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor (up)on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed . . .'"

We all know the beloved Christmas story. We hear it again and again each year at this season. We sing about it in our hymns in church and listen to it again and again in our favorite Christmas music on the radio. Our children re-enact it in

Christmas plays and Epiphany pageants year after year. We know the story; or do we?

Sometimes I fear that we remember only a portion of the story, and then turn a blind eye to the rest. Sometimes I fear we recall that beloved tale only through rose-tinted glasses. Oftentimes we remember only the good parts, the little baby lying innocently in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes, surrounded by a lowly ox and ass, and local shepherd boys kneeling before him with their little lambs about their shoulders. We remember the heavenly chorus of angels in the sky singing hosannas and glory to God in the highest. We remember the exotic kings from the East opening their mysterious presents while a brilliant star glows brightly overhead, over the little town of Bethlehem, lying quietly in the vale, one silent night so long ago. Sometimes we even see a little drummer boy at the manger, or the Christmas mouse, or frosty the snowman, along with Santa and his elves readying presents for all the good little boys and girls. Too often, it seems to me, we recall the Christmas story as though we were wearing blinders.

And when we do that, we seem to forget the rest of the story. We ignore the distress of that young Jewish girl from a small backwater town who is suddenly frightened and confused by the message of the angel. We forget the pain that her betrothed and beloved Joseph felt at the news, how that he was planning to

divorce Mary quietly after hearing that she was pregnant. We overlook the fact that that the young unmarried frightened pregnant girl from Galilee fled her hometown with haste to stay with her relative Elizabeth in a Judean village in the hill country, to avoid the unanswered questions of her neighbors and friends. We turn a blind eye to the very real panic of the King Herod at the Magi's news of a new King of the Jews. We forget about the young holy family suddenly fleeing for their very lives, forced to settle down in another country as strangers, in a distant Egypt, leaving behind their livelihoods, leaving behind their families and their friends, living as foreign refugees, while that angry king slaughtered all the young innocent children in Bethlehem. Surely the screams and cries of those murdered children, and the anguished laments and wails of their parents, must have drowned out any previous heavenly song of angelic choruses, if we are really listening to the story, if we are truly remembering the events. But too often we see the Christmas story only through rose-tinted glasses. And we pretend that it was all good.

When the young, frightened Mary first arrived at her cousin Elizabeth's house in Judea, far from her home in Galilee, Mary sang out in song, a song best known from its Latin title as the Magnificat, but a song which is definitely not some young girl's jubilant hymn of praise, but is instead a radical political

tirade that longs to turn the world upside down. But we often miss that in our remembering the Christmas story.

Mary, it seems, sang a song of what she hoped would happen with the birth of her son, but that day has yet to come.

Clearly, not all of the "proud" have been "scattered" in the imaginations of their own hearts. In fact, not much of what Mary sang about has come to pass. The "proud" are more assertive now than ever have been. The "powerful" still occupy their thrones, while the "lowly" still prowl garbage heaps for food and live in squalor. The "hungry" are hungrier than ever, even in this land of plenty. The "rich" aren't going away "empty handed," but are solidifying their hold on wealth and power in this country.

While Israel, the object of God's "mercy" in Mary's song is in a state of perpetual war with its neighbors, and one button away from nuclear annihilation.

In the aftermath of an endless stalemate in our national politics, of the ongoing greed of the wealthy in this country and the obstinacy of the powerful, the ranks of the lowly and humble in Mary's song are not diminishing, but are multiplying, especially in the midst of this global pandemic, and Mary's dream seems even further away now than ever. Still her song is what people will hear Christians sing throughout our churches this Christmas.

Ultimately, I believe, the task is on us to make that dream come true. It is on us to magnify God, and not just our own reflections. It is on us to be "servants of the Lord" with whom God blesses the world. It is on us to give up our own thrones and the splendid logic of our own conceits, and the imaginations of our hearts. It is on us to rejoice and to bear God, and not arms. We can be like Mary when she echoed the ancient Song of Hannah, and proclaimed God's smiting of the "powerful" and filling up of the "hungry." For Mary, like Hannah before us, longed for the overturning of humanity's tragic story and the bringing forth of a new day, of peace on earth and goodwill among mankind, but it is up to us to do our part to make this happen.

So, Mary's song should be our song too at this Christmastide. In these troubled times, we Christians must have something relevant to say to this sinful and broken world of ours, where people can buy weapons so easily and gun down innocent children in their classrooms, where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and the gap between the two grows ever wider, and no one seems to care. Where so many impoverished people die unnecessarily of diseases for which we have vaccines and cures, but not the willpower to make it so.

Let us be the ones who respond to the various crises of our day with amazing acts of bravery and self-sacrifice and

generosity, like Mary and Joseph. And yet, far too often we see good Christian folks being kind in church and then savaging each other in parking lot conversations after the service. We feel our hearts turn to the light in the sky while singing with friends, but then turn to the darkness in our road rage, our disregard for those different from us, our fear, and our selfish appetites. We praise God on Sundays, and forget about God and God's people on Mondays.

At such a moment as this in our nation's history, let us be the ones who struggle to make the world a better place, who seek to live lives of meaning and purpose, who help change and transform the lives of others, who care for the orphan and widow, the stranger and alien and refugee in our midst, the least of these our brethren --- and not only at this season, but all year long.

We Christians mustn't been known only by our misbehaving clergy and the whining of religious partisans or the prancing of costumed prelates. We must be known by our actions and our demands, our actions and demands for simple goodness and kindness in the world, for justice and mercy, often against the wealthy and powerful, in a song like Mary's. We Christians ought to be known by our efforts to establish peace on earth and goodwill among mankind. But are we known for this?

So let there be no more free passes for the merchants of misery. No more cringing before the power of the political lobbies. No more being careful not to offend big givers. No more ignoring how John, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus all really did suffer, and it wasn't just in order for us to just perpetuate some peculiar rituals of Advent and Christmastide. No more pretending that ours is a happy, simple world where everyone waits for Jesus and Santa Claus, and looks at the world only through rose tinted glasses.

This week for Christmas Eve, I invite you and your friends and your neighbors to come join with us, not as we self-righteously proclaim that Jesus has come and all's right with the world, but as we all get down upon our knees together and hold up candles against the darkness of night, and sing the song of Mary, sing of the promises of our God, and of our hopes for salvation, resting in the assurance that the darkness will not overcome us, and that tomorrow we will further the cause of justice and peace, that we will construct a better world, a more just society, that we will build up the very kingdom that Jesus came to inaugurate on that silent night so long ago. AMEN.