

July 17, 2011  
Luke 1:39-55  
Genesis 28:10-19a

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*Send Me Away Empty*

It may seem strange to have heard this wonderful passage from Luke's gospel at this time of year. Known as the Cantic of Mary, Mary's Song or the Magnificat, it is an expression of faith, humility and wonder. Magnificat means to magnify and when we hear Mary say, "My soul doth magnify the Lord," it is familiar, indeed. But the definition of magnify that we know—to make greater in size, as in with a magnifying lens—is not exactly what Mary meant. The ancient meaning was to praise, glorify and extol. Yet, I am intrigued with idea that Mary's soul and spirit made God greater in some way; as we look at the scripture more closely, I'd like to keep this curious idea afloat.

Summer in the Champlain Valley is a lot like Christmas, a grand, robust celebration. Even after the trying beginning to the season, our little section of the world has come a gleaming round. The lake is behaving itself, the corn doubles in height overnight; it seems there's never been such an extended stretch of great haying weather, the sun shines high in the sky and the breeze off the lake refreshes and it seems that the moon does reflect the glory of God. Family from afar flock to our homes, kitchens are busy, washing machines soldier on and everyone wants a perfect vacation—or at least a vacation. At Christmas time the same kind of pressure comes to bear; we set such high expectations that sometimes we doom ourselves to disappointment. Generally things don't go exactly as we plan at Christmas; someone's feelings get hurt, another person falls ill, planes are canceled, storms invade, tempers are short and grace does not always abound.

This can happen even here in our little heavenly world; the frenzy of summer fun can wear us out. And likewise if we are alone, the sadness of not having someone with whom to share a glorious summer day can magnify our loneliness. The call, I think, is to

be open, as Mary was, to the unexpected, the shift in plans, the things that don't go as anticipated. Sometimes we are so busy figuring out how to control our lives that we miss the absurd, magnificent beauty that surrounds us. As Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote:

*Glory be to God for dappled things--  
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-fall; finches' wings;  
Landscape platted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;  
And all trades, their gear and tackle trim.  
All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change;  
Praise him.*

Our lives are dappled now and then, by things that don't go right. I suspect that there is a part in all of us that wants this summer to be perfect, or at least the best we can make it under the circumstances, and, let's face it, for some the circumstances are grueling: financial worries, health fears, the loss of loved ones all compound to set us off kilter. And along the way, struggling to make things better, struggling to fashion from shards of a life a bowl of blessing, some of us just about do ourselves in. By trying to erase all the dapples, to fill in the holes and smooth over the lumps, to make the sad child happy, forgive the cold and dismissive parent, stretch the dwindling dollar, deal appropriately with the empty seat at the table, cast a light on sadness, by trying so hard, we inadvertently shut God out.

I honestly think that living in Vermont and especially in this part of Vermont, poses some real theological challenges. I am fond of saying that when we moved here I felt I'd died and gone to heaven. All joking aside, I am familiar with the story of Faust and wonder, not infrequently, if I have made a deal with the devil and chosen heaven now

rather than later. There is, unfortunately, ample biblical support for this view; it seems that Jesus is forever saying that the poor shall inherit the kingdom of heaven.

Here again in the Magnificat, Mary says, “God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” (Lk 1:53) At first this might appear to be yet another dismissal of the rich and a rewarding of the poor, but it bears another look. Sometimes I think of my life as a bowl. When it is full to overflowing, as it is so much of the time, there simply isn’t room for God. But when I feel hollowed out, when the fill line is lowered, when what I see mostly are the lumps, sharp edges and imperfections in myself and in my life, when I hunger, yearn and, yes, ache and mourn, then there is space in my heart for God’s healing grace.

You know what it’s like to eat a meal when you’re *really* famished. Sheer heaven. In comparison, food on a stomach only moderately hungry is fine but not extraordinary. Perhaps the greatest gift that God could give those whose cups are full is to hollow them out a bit, let them know true yearning, send them away empty. In order to be filled with God’s love, to be filled with good things, we must first make space in our lives, in our hearts.

This is part of what Mary was talking about, making room for Jesus. Our hearts also won’t be ready if we polish away all the dapples and disregard the odd and strange and holy peculiar things that surround us. The goal, I think, is yearning and there is a long and rich spiritual tradition that is founded on understanding this palpable, concrete desire for God. If everything in our lives and in the world were perfect we would not have needed Jesus. It is precisely because all is not right that God came among us and is born in our hearts again and again. As the summer goes on perhaps in one way or another you feel a little fried, or hurt or lonely or frightened of what the future may bring. Rather than fleeing from that feeling, hold onto that shaking, frantic, sad, distraught feeling and know that your yearning is the highway for your God. The holes in your heart are holy, for it is through them that the Holy Spirit, the breath of God will move. Be open and then be ready to rejoice and celebrate God’s love.

When Mary went to visit Elizabeth upon hearing that she too was pregnant, the baby in Elizabeth's womb, "leaped for joy." When did you last leap for joy? For many it may have been a quite a while since you were able to crawl out from under all that burdens you and leap for joy in sheer wonder and awe.

When God decided to go all out for us, to fill our cups with love, we were not sent the idea of a Christ or a twitter of a Christ or a fax of a Christ, virtual Christ or the promise of redemption, we were sent a real person.

Chances are that there have been times in your lives when no platitude consoled, no wisdom offered comfort, no words for all their power sufficed to soothe your broken heart. But then did someone come to you? Did someone take your hand or sit beside you or lay a soft touch on your cheek? You probably don't remember what that person said so much as you remember his or her being there. It costs nothing to be a friend. You are the greatest gift other people could ever get, you, a real person being present and loving and real.

Maybe that's part of what God was trying to show us on that first Christmas, that first Holy Day when things weren't right in the world and apprehension blanketed Bethlehem. People were frightened and their hearts were full of holes and God said, Yeah, maybe now they are open enough for me. So into dappled hearts the love of God blew in on the wings of promise and in the form of an ordinary person. It may not be Advent but we need to remember in all the seasons of our lives that God comes fresh and bright every day.

For the past week we have had two of our grandchildren with us while their parents went on a trip to Paris. They left this morning at 4:00 am. Zerach is 3 ½ and Phoebe is 9 months. When we brought them to church last week on day 2 of the adventure, a couple of wise grandparents smiled knowingly and said, "You've got your hands full." Some of you know that Charlie works out of state during the week and though he did make it home from New York or Washington DC or Massachusetts all but a couple of nights, for the most part it was Haliana Burhans—God bless her, and me during the days. Days filled with utter joy and utter exhaustion. I had forgotten what it is

like to see the world through a child's eyes, to marvel at a caterpillar's fuzz, to make believe you are a hero and can save the day, to awake to a new day smiling so broadly that your back arches and your arms fling wide. The days were so filled, the house such a total disaster, that I could barely think beyond the next couple of hours, let alone, I might add, write a sermon. Out on my early morning runs while Jane stayed home with the sleeping children, I would beseech God. "Give me a sign, quick! Fill me with inspiration! I'm running out of time." Nothing came.... oh, odd bits here and there but it seemed God could not break into my cluttered, busy, rich and bountiful life.

Until yesterday when I thought of their leaving this morning. And suddenly I felt so empty, so hollowed out, so full of yearning and so sad that I finally felt that I saw God glisten through my tears, sitting quietly and watching me. Do you see, now? God seemed to be saying. Do you know hallowed and hollowed desire? Do you see why I had to come to you as a baby? And I knew once again the richness of the incarnation and the love and care we are called to give. Love each other as you love the small and frail—whether young or old care for the creation as if it were waking each morning, smiling from ear to ear at the sight of you and throwing wide its arms in love, trust and hope.

Ironically, God *was* magnified by Mary's bringing forth a small baby, made more real, more tangible more present and with us, Emanuel. However we know or understand Jesus the man, the prophet, the Savior, the Christ, we all begin by understanding Jesus the baby in the Nativity. And then perhaps over time and through Him we come to know the One who loved us enough to let his child go. For each of us to know ourselves as a child of God is not so much about knowing who we are as it is truly knowing how much God loves each and every one of us-----counter, original, spare, strange; fickle, swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim; in all the freckled oddness, in the hollows of your aching and yearning heart, may God enter in and may you give a leap for joy.

Amen.