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The First Christmas Carols: Mary's Rouser!

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TEXT: Luke 1:46-55 (ESV)

And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on
all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things
for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from
generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered
the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from
their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with
good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant
Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and
to his offspring forever."

Every once in a great while, I'll have the opportunity to attend a University of Minnesota Gopher basketball game, and that's always fun. Win or lose, it's just a thrill to walk into that old arena called "The Barn." I especially enjoy hearing the crowd break into the Gopher rouser song when they've just made a basket that's put them ahead and a timeout's called. The crowd jumps to their feet and sings that Minnesota fight song: "Minnesota, hats off to thee," and the place is energized and the team's spirits are lifted to keep them going as they hear the crowd sing and clap and roar. "M-I-N-N-E-S-O-T-A! Minnesota! Minnesota! Yay, Gophers!"

Well, in today's passage we have a Christmas rouser from Mary, the mother of Jesus. Church tradition has entitled it "the Magnificat" because of its opening line: "My soul magnifies the Lord." There's a wonderful story behind the song a young woman named

Mary, a teenager living in Nazareth, engaged to a man, Joseph, and looking forward to just living out of normal life, suddenly had an angel named Gabriel appear to her and tell her she was blessed, for she was going to give birth to the savior. Mary, being a virgin, asked, "How can this be?" And Gabriel explained, "The Holy Spirit of God will come upon you and you'll bear a child." Mary said, "Well, then let it be to me, according to your word." And sometime later, after talking with that angel, she went to meet with Elizabeth, whom the Angel had told her about – that she had been barren for so many years but now was pregnant. And the child in Elizabeth's womb – who was to be John the Baptist – leaped for joy when Mary approached Elizabeth. And Elizabeth says, "What brings the mother of my lord to see me? Blessed are you, Mary for you believed in God's promise."

Her faith confirmed, Mary breaks in to this song in front of Elizabeth. It's a faith-filled song of thanks and praise, like one of the Old Testament Psalms. "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior." Mary sounds happy, excited, thrilled. And so, she belts this song out with her whole being. "My soul magnifies the Lord." She's rejoicing in God's greatness. This song is a celebration of God – telling what he has done. Seven times in this song "he has..., he has..., he has..., he has..." again and again, talking about what God has done. She first gives her personal testimony of what God's done in her life. She said, "He has looked on the humble estate of his servant." In other words,

He's picked me – ordinary Mary – to play a role in his salvation plan. He could have found a rich, noble, powerful queen in a palace, but instead he's come to an insignificant girl like me. I may be little in the eyes of the world, but it appears I'm valuable to him. He has great plans for me. I'll be called blessed from now on because of what he's done. He's done great things for me. I'm going to give birth to the savior and God is behind all this. It's an honor, a privilege that God's given me.

The New International Version translates these words, "He has looked on me in this way. God has been mindful of me." In other words, he's thought of me. He's noticed me. Called me to himself. And that's a privilege. It's God's mercy and grace at work.

Then Mary goes on to sing of God's Mercy that is available for everyone in every generation, those who fear him. That word "mercy" is used in the Old Testament to describe the loyal love of God. And Israel, as you know, experienced that loyal love of God over and over again in the Old Testament, even in their most rebellious and

stubborn times. That word “fear” means not to be frightened, but to have holy reverence for, and desiring to come to him and be his. And then Mary lists off, six times, what God in his mercy has done and will do. It's a picture of power. God is pictured here as a warrior, a champion of the helpless and downtrodden, a faithful rescuer of his nation. She recalls God's might and mercy in defeating Israel's enemies in the past, when she says, “He's performed mighty deeds with his arms. He has strengthened those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.” And what comes to mind as Israel's battles with their enemies that were won by God. For instance, the Egyptians at the Red Sea – who won that battle? God won that battle for Israel. Or Gideon against the Midianites – God won that battle. Or Sennacherib and the Syrian army when they surrounded Jerusalem and proudly mocked God's power because they were not God fearers, God showed his strong arm and took them down. He's brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate. We think of kings that were overthrown by God: Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar, replaced by God's servant King Cyrus of Persia, who let Israel return to their land after years of exile in Babylon. Mary says he's filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. I'm reminded of the Exodus story again, when God caused the Egyptian population to give away their riches to the Hebrews after Pharaoh gave in and freed them from slavery after all those plagues. And he has helped Israel over the years, always remembering his promises to Abraham to make his descendants a blessing to all the nations of the world, Mary says. He's never forgotten, never deserted his people in spite of their rebelliousness. Just checked the Old Testament out and you'll see that.

Now, Mary may not only be looking back to the past history. Some biblical scholars suggest that she might also be looking ahead – in a way prophesying – describing Jesus' work in the rest of Luke's gospel. He's showed his strength with his arm, exercising his power and strength over sickness and nature and the demonic and death. And he scattered the proud, didn't he, taking on the proud, self-righteous Pharisees and scribes who thought they had it all together before God and deserved God's favor, and every time they had a conflict with them, they'd be scattered by what he had to say. And he opposed the mighty on their thrones and exalted those of humble estate. Jesus did not go to the mighty, to the power brokers, to bring in his kingdom. No, he went to the outcast, the ignored, the poor, and the ordinary. And he wasn't born in a palace, but in a stable. And mortal kings like Caesar would die and Herod would die. But the humble servant king Jesus lives forever. And Jesus filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. I'm reminded of the feeding of the 5,000 in the wilderness and

challenging the rich young ruler enough to have that rich young ruler walk away dejected because he couldn't give up his riches. And Jesus did help the lost sheep of Israel, not only declaring God's offer of mercy to them first, but ultimately offering it to them through his death on a cross in his resurrection. When that happened, God's promise to Abraham was ultimately fulfilled. Jesus is the Lord and Savior, the blessing to all the nations. God's word came to pass in him.

So, we learned from Mary's song that the story of the birth of Jesus is not just about a sweet little baby boy born in a stable who never says or does anything, but Christmas is about a mindful and merciful and mighty God who stepped into our dark world and did great things for us. Mary's song can actually serve as a rouser for us to inspire us and lift our sagging spirits when all looks like doom and gloom, and we feel forgotten by God. It helps us to sing to God all the more, even in the dark, when things look dark because it's the gospel, it's the gospel truth. God is mindful of you and me. God is merciful to those who call upon his name, and God is mighty and active and in charge of his world. We want to hang on to that truth in all circumstances.

I'm reminded of a story I came across years ago when there was still the reality of the Iron Curtain. You remember those days. A newspaper article was written that described Christmas Day for Christians in Sarajevo. The awful warfare was all around them despite the promise of a cease fire. The airport was closed. More than a dozen civilians had already been killed when the article was being written, and shelling the residential sections of the city, the Serbian army (just to break morale) caused great havoc on that Christmas day in Sarajevo. One reporter was downtown when the horde sounds of shelling finally was dying down, and he said, "I suddenly heard something. I heard, people in the church is singing Christmas carols – *singing Christmas carols* – to God, praise to God, even in the darkness."

Friend, remember, God has been mindful of you and me. As broken and imperfect as we are, he's mindful of you, he knows you. He loves you. He has plans for your life. You're not just another face in the crowd to him. He knows what keeps you awake at night, what brings you joy. He knows your imperfections and your hidden secrets and your sins, and he loves you anyway and wants to be in a relationship with you and actually use your life to do great things for his purposes, just like he did with Mary. He wants to bless you. And God, in his mercy, has done a great and merciful thing for you and for me through this child Mary would bear, God's son. We were lost in our

sinfulness and rebellion, separated from God, Hell-bound, unable to save ourselves. And in the fullness of time, God did an amazing, merciful thing for us. He exercised his strong arm in order to save us and make us his own forever by giving us Jesus. Jesus entered our world to rescue us from our greatest enemies: sin and death and the devil, which hold the sinner captive.

Now, when I say us, I mean you and I mean me. This is personal. He did it for you and for me. That son allowed himself to be crucified on the cross in order to pay the penalty for our sins and restore our relationship with God. And the promises that all who repent and believe in him have forgiveness for their sins, a new start, a restored relationship with God. And this Jesus rose again victoriously, defeating the power of death, opening up God's Heaven to all who will place their trust in his son. A place has been prepared in our father's house by Jesus Christ. And when I think about this, I think of Paul's words in Romans 8, when he asked the Roman Christians, "If God is for us, then who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son, will he not also give us all things?" And this Jesus someday will reappear. I mean, there's more to Mary's prophecy, it looks way ahead when Jesus reappears at the end and every knee of princes and paupers and sons and daughters and kings and presidents and citizens of all nations will all bow down, and every tongue confess that Jesus is lord, to the glory of God, the father. And he will take us to himself. And finally all will be well. That's what Mary's song is telling us. It's a song of faith about a God who knows you and cares about you and has a loyal love for you. And nothing can separate or separate you from that love through his son, Jesus Christ.

So keep on praying to him. Keep on serving him. Keep on keeping on. Keep on running the good race of faith. Keep on singing. For God has done a great thing for us. Let's pray.

Thank you, God, for giving Mary that song, reminding us of how mindful and merciful and mighty you really are. Help us to have faith in you in all circumstances of life as we await Christ's reappearing in majesty and glory.

Amen

I invite you now to join me in magnifying our great God. let's sing this familiar and powerful Christmas carol to him with our all our soul. "Joy to the world. The Lord is come."