

Luke 1: 46-55

Second Baptist Church, Lincoln NE
Dr. Stephen Wisthoff Dec. 13, 2009

When the Soul Overflows

⁴⁶ And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all
generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me-- holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are
proud in their inmost thoughts.
⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."

There is nothing that causes the Christian's soul to sing like reading the Psalms. When someone is dying, Psalm 23 is most often read at their bedside and again at their funeral. It reminds us of the presence of God when we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death. I like Psalm 121 because it reminds us of the source of our strength and hope: "¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills-- where does my help come from?" When we sin and have need for God's forgiveness, we find the wonderful Psalm of repentance in Psalm 51. After David sinned with Bathsheba and was confronted by Nathan the Prophet, he cried out to the Lord, "Cleanse me O God and know my heart." When we need to discover the way to live the Christian life, some great advice is found in the very first Psalm: ¹ Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.
² But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. (Psalm 1:1-2)

When our soul overflows with joy as did for David the Psalmist, Psalm 100 might reflect our joy when it suggests we "Sing to the Lord a new song." We don't find that same genre of literature in the New Testament. The beautiful and image-filled phrases of the Hebrew books turn to more logical and matter-of-fact books of the epistles. Certainly, Jesus' words in the gospels are filled with psalm-like images from nature and beauty for he had been brought up hearing the psalms and

appreciating the picturesque images. In this brief passage in today's scripture, it is as though we return to the Psalms. Mary's heart is full to overflowing as she responds to the message brought her by the angel. We call this the "Magnificat" (Latin) which composers like Monteverdi, Bach, Vivaldi and John Rutter have set to music. When I was in the college choir, we performed the Rutter version and I had a little idea of the joy Mary must have felt as she spoke those words.

The Greek word "Megaluno" is used in the Greek New Testament meaning, "To cause to grow, expand or swell up." The word "rejoice" is one meaning to be overjoyed, expressing unspeakable gladness.

These past few weeks, we've been talking about some specific prayers of Advent uttered by some of the characters we generally associate with the Nativity Story. A couple weeks ago, I talked about Zechariah and the expectation and waiting he must have experienced, reminding us that it is typical for us to have to wait for God's response -- for his timing is different than our timing. His prayers were answered far beyond his expectations as he not only experienced having a son in his old age, but he witnessed the Christchild.

Last week we talked about his elderly wife Elizabeth who gave birth to John the Baptist. She found complete hope in a time of hopelessness. Those are important aspects of prayer. Waiting for God to answer in his time and praying with hope and faith even when it seems hopeless. As we look at the life of the third person of faith, Mary the mother of Jesus, we will be introduced to the role of worship in prayer, or could we say "prayer in worship." As Baptists, we haven't always known what to do with Mary. The Catholic church has elevated her to a position of deity -- so as protestants, we've gone to the other extreme and minimized her to a level of being nothing special. So who is she? The Bible is pretty clear that she is more than an ordinary woman. She is more than average. In fact, she is described as being very special. She is a woman of faith who accepted God's blessing on her life. She accepted God's blessing in the face of what would likely be public ridicule since she was not yet married. She trusted God to provide for her needs. She saw this as a blessing and not a crisis, because she believed God. So as the reality of the message of the angel began to sink in, she marveled at it and expressed her joy as she realized that SHE HAD BEEN CHOSEN. What did she do? She began to magnify the Lord or prayed in a manner that God was expanded and made to swell.

How can we make God swell or grow? Isn't he already greater than the most inflated imagination? What Mary did was, took God from the ordinary way we often see God and inflated him to be closer to whom he really is. She made God more life-size.

See, we tend to keep God pretty small. We are casual about him. "So what, he created all there is and he created us. So what that he takes care of us everyday and we can always depend upon him." God has become mundane and this is reflected in our worship. We say we believe all these things about God but it doesn't come out in our worship. See, genuine worship involves real joy and gladness on our part. Like Mary, when our heart overflows, it comes out in our worship.

Sometimes when I look out on the congregation on a Sunday morning, I see sad, morose, bored faces. I see people not singing, not praying, standing and sitting – all on auto-pilot. Sometimes I wonder, do we have nothing to sing about, nothing to be joyful about? Think about it: God came down to this earth in the form of a child who grew to be a man and died on the cross for wretched people like me. He closed the mouth of hell so that I wouldn't have to go there. He provides for, protects, blesses and comforts me. When I speak his name, he bends his ear to earth to hear me. Because of that, I've got something to sing about and be glad about.

Do you have that joy? Worship doesn't have to involve handstands. You don't have to become Pentecostal to celebrate Christ. Do you look forward to real worship, or is this just going to church. Do you have a hunger and desire to hear God's word, to pray, to praise, to thank him and to rejoice. When we pray like Mary prayed, it is worship. When we speak to God admiringly and with adoration, it is worship. But that's only referring to our benefit from worship. Worship is actually a service to God.

The greatest thing we can do is worship God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism written in the 1600s by Scottish and English churchmen states, **"Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever"** Worshiping God is to glorify him. I'm not speaking about worship style. Some people think you can only worship with an electric guitar and drums and others think real worship is with a pipe organ.

Worship is a matter of the heart. We can have the most beautiful music, but if our heart is distant from God and our relationship with God is weak, it means

nothing. Also, worship is lasting. When we look at Mary, her praise was with her long after the angel left. When Mary says that her soul magnifies the Lord, she uses a verb in the present tense that expresses continuous action. Literally, she says: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and will go on magnifying the Lord.”

Genuine worship doesn't stop when adverse circumstances arise. A pastor friend of mine lost his daughter in a tragic car accident. She was returning home from work early in the morning when a drunk crossed the center line and demolished her car. She died in the hospital the next day. I attended the funeral service and I was amazed at the joy in that service. For a half hour, the congregation stood and sang praise and worship music. The place was filled with a strange mix of sorrow and joy. See, we worship a God who never changes. His promises never fail. Therefore, regardless of what happens to me, I can continue to praise God.

Remember the story of Paul and Silas in Acts 16 when they were arrested and put into prison for preaching the gospel. It says in verse 25, “But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.” That's worship. Even in adverse circumstances, there is joy. Sometimes worship isn't as exciting as it could be. While you are there thinking about the Royals or Chiefs game or thinking about that roast in the oven, you're not exactly worshiping. When you are thinking of the stresses of this past week or what size sweater you should buy for your sister for Christmas, you're probably not worshiping. It might be because we are bored or distracted. Maybe you didn't like something we did in worship and it is eating away at you so your worship is just not happening. The truth is, we come to offer ourselves to God more than we are here to receive.

Secondly, if we do not worship God individually during the week, we bring no gift to offer here on Sundays. Worship is a reflection of our relationship with the Lord. If it is weak and we spend little time with the Lord during the week, then our desire for him on Sunday morning is not going to suddenly appear. Worship reflects our ongoing relationship with the Lord. In verse 49, Mary says, “For the mighty one has done great things for me.” I want you to say that with me this morning. I want to close in prayer and at the end of certain phrases, I want you to join with me in saying, “For the mighty one has done great things for me.”

Let's pray: "Father, we thank you for the gift of life you've given to us along with the joy of having relationships with each other. You've made our church a group of diverse and wonderful people all seeking to serve and love you.

Response: "For the mighty one has done great things for me."

Lord, when we feel distressed and frustrated by what life sends our way, we know that you are present and you want to help us. You want to help us but you also want us to have faith, and sometimes that means accepting pain – and then we can identify with the pain your son experienced on the cross.

Response: "For the mighty one has done great things for me."

God, you have forgiven us when we did not deserve to be forgiven. You've taken our sin and cast it away like worthless trash. You have forgotten it and you desire that we do the same. Help us to accept your grace.

Response: "For the mighty one has done great things for me."

Now bless us, Lord, as we live a life filled with joy, always desiring to worship you.

Response: "For the mighty one has done great things for me." AMEN.