

UNLEASHING A SPIRIT OF JOY
A Sermon On Luke 1:46b-55
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"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."

In the summer of 1976, when Terry and I were still childless, I left Terry for two weeks and traveled to Indiana University to attend a choral conducting workshop with Robert Shaw, at that time the premier choral conductor in America.

This was no stage door encounter. This was a face-to-face, day-to-day, word-to-word encounter with a world famous man who remains a hero for me, even now long after his death. Robert Shaw knew more about choral singing than any one else in the world. Robert Shaw understood the mystical process of making notes on paper come alive in a creation of words and pitch. He understood it better than anyone I ever met. I believe he understood it better than anyone who ever lived. Here's the thing. Fred Warring was a better showman. Quite possibly he was a better technician. But Robert Shaw knew how to use a collection of singers to induce the heart of the listener to soar. This was especially true when it came to the music of Christmas. Shaw loved the rich tradition of classical Christmas music and he produced it better than anyone else. Shaw once wrote to his singers, *"All that we have accomplished is nothing unless it releases the spirit to sing and shout and laugh and cry or pray the primitive prayer."*

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."

That is the quality that is so captivating in the text for today. What we have in Mary's words is nothing less than the release of her spirit and the inevitable song such release produces. If you pay attention to nothing else in the Christmas scriptures pay attention to this. Nothing is more important. Argue all you want about the miracle of a virgin birth. Debate endlessly about the

importance of shepherds verses wise men. It does not matter. No other detail embodies more completely God's agenda in the birth of Jesus than the words of Mary when she says, "***My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.***"

My spirit is in need of some release right now. I feel weighed down by the reality of Terry's illness, the knowledge that life is a difficult struggle for many in our community, the profound inability of political leaders to work together to address critical problems, and the endless games we play seeking power in the culture and in the church. This Christmas I am seeking release. I want to know that the problems we face and the ill spirit we display are not the final word. I am tired of email rants against political leaders. I am distressed by the endless fear mongering and thinly disguised hate speech dressed up as righteous indignation. Before I retire, I want to know that I have been a part of something good and noble and liberating. I want to know that my efforts over the course of years have been in tune with God's plan to bring peace and justice into the world.

Releasing the spirit to sing and shout and pray is not just good instruction to the Robert Shaw Chorale. It is the central message of Christmas. Taken seriously it is nothing less than God's liberating birth in our lives. But we have taken this astounding Magnum Mysterium, this magnificent liberating mystery, and we have trivialized it with dogs barking out Jingle Bells or my personal favorite, Porky Pig singing "*I'll Have a Blue Christmas Without You.*" Christmas music has become more noteworthy for the monstrous nature of its novelty than for the magnificence of its mystery. No spirits are released. No hearts are moved to sing or pray. If I could give one thing to this world or to the congregations I am privileged to serve while I am in it, it would be to give back the sense that God is moving and acting to free troubled hearts. That it is possible for those in the deepest bondage to be touched by God and released from their chains. That no matter who you are or what station your life God might choose you to change the world.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."

When was the last time you described anything in your life as **MAGNIFICENT**? When you rolled out of bed this morning how did you greet the day? Did you take a peek at the morning and declare the day magnificent? Did you look ahead to the schedule of events in your day and find any measure of joy? How long has it been since you were moved to tears by the sheer beauty of anything? When was the last time you encountered something so astounding you were convinced that God must have had a hand in it?

Perceiving magnificence requires special eyes. How can it possibly be that Mary should find magnificence in the situation she faced? When Mary declares, ***"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."*** it cannot possibly be that she was pleased with her circumstances. There was nothing magnificent about her life at that moment. Here she was a very young woman (possibly as young as thirteen or fourteen). Most likely Joseph was far older than she. Quite possibly he was taking her away from home for the first time. On top of everything else, before she and Joseph could be together she discovers that she is pregnant. If I had been in her situation I would have seen nothing magnificent about it. But Mary, hearing the news that she was about to have this child declares, **MAGNIFICENT!** ***"My spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden."*** How is it that Mary could see this situation as a gift from God when most of us would have regarded it as a curse? How can I acquire Mary's vision and spirit? How can we?

We have enjoyed a wonderful year in the midst of very difficult circumstances. As Robert Shaw said, "All that we have accomplished is nothing unless it releases the spirit to sing and shout..." Liberating the spirit of this church has been our calling throughout this past year. It is the voice of God that calls us to things greater than ourselves. It is the voice of God inviting us to


accomplish more than we ever imagined. It is the voice of God urging us to set fear aside and respond to God's miraculous intrusion into human history. The truth is that being the Body of Christ is a magnificent mystery that should have each one of us declaring, ***“My spirit rejoices in God my savior.”***

Remember this. Before Mary's joy filled outburst, before the slightly girlish scene in Judah when she and her kinswoman Elizabeth share their mutual good news, it was the angel Gabriel, who declared, **“DO NOT BE AFRAID! FOR GOD IS AT WORK IN YOUR LIFE.”** I know that is not the way Luke presents it, but it is the fundamental message Mary receives. Convinced that she has nothing to fear and that God is at work in her life she is free to sing her song. ***“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.”*** That is what I desire for this church – to know that we have nothing to fear and that God is at work among us. Then our spirits will soar.

In 1976 I met Robert Shaw and he taught me something I never learned from a preacher. He taught me that nothing matters unless we have managed to release the spirit of God's people. He taught me that setting the spirit free to sing and shout and laugh and pray is more important than committee meetings and conducting techniques. But if I had paid attention I could have learned the same lesson much earlier. For Mary, attuned to God's liberating promise declared, ***“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.”*** It is a magnum mysterium, a magnificent mystery worthy of a song.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

Mary's Song of Praise

- ⁴⁶And Mary  said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”
⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.