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Luke 1:46-55

A BETTER STORY

Sometime when I was in elementary or middle school, a science teacher had us kids go out and collect pond water and then examine it under a microscope. If you have ever done that yourself, you will know what amazing things you can see in pond water. Under the power of magnification, we could now observe strange and bizarre looking organisms swimming around. They were there in the water all the time, but without magnification, we could not see them. On the other hand, sometimes it might be better *not* to see them! Have you ever seen a magnified photo of the microscopic organisms that live on our pillows or even those that live on our skin? Very frightening! It's really better to not know what they look like!

There is power in magnification, and not only the magnification we can do with microscopes but also the magnification we do with our hearts and minds. What image, what story, what topics will become enlarged in our hearts and minds? Imagine that you and I are handed a magnifying glass to carry around with us each day of our lives. What will we focus our magnifying glass on? What stories will dominate our minds and hearts?

It is understandable that stories of hardship are the ones that are often magnified in our lives. To start with, those are the stories that typically make the newspapers and the evening news programs. Every day we are bombarded with stories of cruelty, suffering, pain, greed, and hatred: stories of shootings at schools, churches, or synagogues, stories of impoverished migrants trying to reach safety or of corrupt politicians, stories of melting ice caps and drowning polar bears, stories of factory closures and employee lay-offs, stories of sexual abuse and racial violence. The list goes on and on and we become easily overwhelmed by the bad news.

And then, of course, there are the trials and struggles of our personal lives: our health issues, our family problems, our work dissatisfaction, the daily irritations that arise in life that because of fatigue or stress or lack of time become magnified in our hearts and minds.

It's not like we can ignore these stories. These stories are real. And these stories are important. And these stories affect us and other people. There is real suffering and pain that matters in this world. But are they the only story that's out there?

In her famous song called the Magnificat, Jesus' mother Mary, magnifies a different story. At the time when Mary sings this song there wasn't much in her life that seemed to be going well. First of all, we have to remember the context of her life. Mary and her people lived in a world of tremendous poverty, where the vast majority of people lived day to day with little food and no security for tomorrow. There was no welfare system if you lost your job or if your husband died and left you penniless, no insurance policies that would kick in the event of injury or illness. Life for Mary and her people under the rule of the Roman occupying force was a precarious existence where death could come at any moment at the hand of Roman soldiers, where cruelty and violence were part of the landscape.

Into this social context of hardship and suffering Mary receives the news that she will become pregnant with Jesus. This unwed pregnancy would spell personal disaster for Mary. Her family, ashamed of her, would likely disown her. She would be shamed and shunned by her community and could face possible stoning to death for immorality. This context of hardship and suffering is the setting for Mary's song.

But at the moment we expect Mary to be laid low by all this bad news, Mary tells a better story. She proclaims, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." Mary sees something going on in her life and in the world that might go unnoticed, something

that needs magnification--like pond organisms that can't be seen without magnification. Mary sees the wondrous activity of God in her life and in the world and she magnifies God so that we might see it too. She magnifies the goodness, justice, and compassion that God will bring about through the birth of her child Jesus. In the midst of her own dire circumstances filled with stories of hardship and suffering, Mary tells a better story.

Advent gives us all a better story to tell. You and I cannot control the stories that will appear on the evening news. There is much about our own personal difficulties we cannot control. But we can decide that we will not let those stories be the only ones to be told. God has given us all a better story to tell. It is the story of love, compassion, kindness, justice, mercy. It is a story of hope for those in despair, of forgiveness for people who have messed up, of kindness to the stranger. It is the story of the marvelous activity of God in this world and in our lives. As we each wrestle with our personal struggles, as we daily contend with the heaviness of the world's darkness, the question we face is, "How do I magnify the Lord in *this* situation? What better story can I tell about God's presence in this world?"

Now, do not confuse this challenge to tell a better story with our American tendency to want people to be cheerful and positive. Nobody likes a complainer, right? So we Americans in particular emphasize positive thinking and tell one another to find the silver lining in every rain cloud. The trouble with this emphasis on looking for the good and positive thinking, is that it doesn't always take seriously the darkness and evil of this world and the real pain of people's lives. This kind of mentality can tend to ignore the bad by trying to focus on the good: "Let's just look for the good!" But the problem is, the bad *is* bad! Mary's song was not about finding the silver lining in her hardships. In her song you can hear the presence of bad things. We hear her sing about proud and powerful leaders who do not act justly, about hungry people who go to bed

without food for themselves and their children and rich people who don't seem to care, and about everyone's need for God's mercy in their lives.

The better story Mary told through her song was not about a "don't worry, be happy" kind of mindset that ignores hardships. Rather, in her song, Mary *confronts* the darkness of her world, looks at it squarely in the face, and then tells a better story. Her story boils down to this: God is good and God is at work. So you all better look out!

Mary's song poses a challenge to all of us who know what it feels like to be overwhelmed by the onslaught of so much bad news. It challenges us to see that there *is* indeed a better story that God has given to us. Can we see it taking place around us? Can we see the story of God's love, mercy, healing, forgiveness, redemption taking place in small and large ways around us? Mary magnifies God so that we too can see this goodness wherever justice is carried out, where people in need are cared for, where the overlooked and disregarded in life are tended to, where mercy and forgiveness are offered to us and to others. She magnifies God so we can see God too.

Then the challenge becomes how we ourselves might join in telling this better story. How can we magnify the Lord in whatever situation we find ourselves? Where might the stranger be welcomed? Where might forgiveness be extended? Where might we raise our voices for those who are powerless? Where might we offer compassion to a neighbor or colleague? Whenever we do this, we confront the powers of darkness with the better story God has given us to tell.

Cheryl Lawrie wrote a poem entitled *For All We Know* in which she reflects upon Mary's circumstances upon finding out she was pregnant with Jesus. She writes:

For all we know,
before Mary sang her song of joy

she wept tears of frustration
despair
and heartbreak.

I like to think she did.

For all we know,
before Mary welcomed God's action with delight,
she fought what was happening to her
and she resented the presumption
of the divine.

For all we know,
for at least a moment
and probably longer,
Mary was bewildered
distracted
and lost.

The miracle we celebrate today
may somehow seem more impossible
than the idea that Mary got pregnant
or that God became human.

It's that in the face of devastation
and from deep within the truth of heartbreak and desolation
there might still come
unbidden
a moment of joy.

Could it be possible that such a miracle was not only given to Mary but also might
happen for you and for me--that in the midst of *our* heartbreak and desolation, we too might find
a moment of joy in the better story of God's love magnified for you and for me?