

Magnify and Glorify -- Advent 3A

"My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit rejoiceth in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

In a Bible Study not long ago, the question arose: What does it mean to say "my soul magnifies the Lord?" Surely God, all-knowing, all-powerful and ever-present, is in no need of enhancement by the likes of us, or even of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the 'BVM' as some of my childhood friends used to call her. They would abruptly leave whatever activity we were engaged in – in the woods, in the attics and basements of our houses, or the back yards of our neighborhood, to go off to "serve mass" as altar boys or attend catechism class at the "Annunziata," the Church of the Annunciation down the road – "We gotta go see the BVM," they'd say. I was always impressed at a religion that couldn't wait for Sunday and didn't mind kids who were pretty grimy, having left the fields of mudball wars and bike-crashing obstacle courses to go to church... on Saturday, of all things. They were sort-of Christian, but they had an extra god and she was a woman!

Now I wonder if my friends' souls too magnified the Lord by their presence in the mass, however parentally compelled? Or is it just Mary who magnifies? The thought of her as someone other, someone different

from us is a difficult one. We have only one god, God, whom we worship. Jesus is begotten of God, and is one with God so Jesus is God too, the same one, whether or not we quite understand it. The Holy Spirit is also God and the three of them are all swirled together in the concept of Trinity. And a tricky concept it is, akin to those three-color candy canes you see: there's red, there's green and there's white but it's all candy cane. But Mary is clearly 'other.'

Amongst the Yoruba people in Nigeria, Benin and Togo there is a religion with many gods, but there is also a trio of qualities that make up a complete person: Aše, Itutu and Iwá. All three are necessary for a whole life. In combination they seem a lot like the God we love and worship. Aše is strength, the force to do things, symbolized by the color red. Itutu is blue, the cool of the blue. It is patience, detachment, self possession, a faith that works under all conditions, the ability to rise above difficulty. The third force is Iwá, the wisdom of the white. Iwá is knowledge of the world and its workings, but it is more. Having Iwá, the wisdom of the white, means you see connections in the world and the oneness of all things. These three interwoven qualities are what make up a whole and perfect person. When combined, the result is akin to the God of our worship: Aše, the power of the red, Itutu, the cool of the blue, Iwá, the wisdom of the white. Power, patience and prescience. God is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. But where does Mary fit in this nexus?

There's a little-known story from the Bible days: One day on the road from Nazareth, Jesus comes upon a group of people about to stone a woman caught in adultery. It's what they did in those days. Today of course we use support groups. There they all are, with heavy rocks held high above their heads, ready to fling them down on the woman when Jesus intervenes: "Stop!" he cries, "Whoever is without sin, let him cast the first stone." One by one, they let their rocks fall slowly at their feet as they slink off, casting reproachful looks over their shoulders. Finally one woman is left standing there, with a middling-sized rock held high. Jesus looks at her, rolls his eyes and says, Awww, come on, Mom..." What Mary adds to the mix is purity. And we can love her for it. But we have to be careful about it. As long as we understand that she is an extraordinary lens through whom to see God, all is well. It's when human societies start insisting that purity is an attainable state, a necessary ingredient to a good life, that secrecy, mendacity and violence ensue.

Yes she is thought of as different; very different. Without sin, a pregnant virgin, able to take a 200-mile donkey ride the day after giving birth, etc. God-bearing but not God; the perfect person. Worshipped regularly, but not divine, prayed-to ceaselessly but fully human; she is the first and greatest Christian Saint. What her life proved once and for all time is that God not only takes us into permanent protective custody, but God also allows us to harbor, nourish, gestate and evoke God's very self in our very selves. She proves that we can be

'godly, righteous and sober' by saying 'yes' to God's will for us and the wonders we witness. By that reckoning, each of our souls can magnify the Lord into perfect focus, if only sporadically.

If even Mary can't increase God any more than can we, her soul's magnifying the Lord must entail polishing the windows of revelation, even breaking and replacing the old, dim, cloudy panes through which God can be but dimly perceived, like the peepholes of old apartment doors, or the thick portholes of a sunken ship. Mary's cousin Elizabeth asks, "What is going on with you? Why did my baby kick when you walked in? Something big is happening here, and it's centered in you, young Cuz." Mary's life and body had become a powerful lens, not to make God bigger or better, but through which we all might perceive God more immediately, with better light and in a clearer context.

The large and definitive dictionary, the Oxford English Dictionary, OED for short, is a wonder to behold, with so many entries , it reminds one of psalm 139 which talks about the thoughts of God being uncountable, like sand on a beach. To look something up in the OED, you have to use the handy magnifying glass that lives in a little drawer that's part of the box the dictionary lives in. Like this, Mary's life, her very soul serves as a magnifier, through whom we might better look at God. Like the OED, with its myriad of words, we must seek to magnify God as we learn to live, in order to face the myriad, small print challenges we encounter

and apprehend the numberless opportunities for grace we receive. As Gandhi said “In a gentle way, you can shake the World.” That’s Mary.

Whether you take Holy Scripture as fundamentally factual history, or as wonderfully evocative legend doesn’t really matter, as long as it serves to magnify the Lord for you. We heard a startling example from Isaiah today, who said, “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.” Even the wildest and most imaginative of our big screen, big budget movies don’t often have the audacity to suggest such a thing: the desert itself singing, even in *Fantasia*. But the desert does sing each Spring through its flowers. The question is, how can we blossom and rejoice?

As the novelist of his day, a great social critic, playwright, commentator, and comedian, Isaiah spins this tale of how the world will be when God ultimately intervenes. But by the time Mary is carrying Jesus to life in her womb, dancing hills and skipping mountains have morphed and focused and been glorified into the immediacy of one life lived, a life through which God is more perceivable, more magnified than ever before: the life of Jesus. The great prophetic possibilities have become a domestic reality of two pregnant women talking about the lives inside themselves and how, in their gentle ways, they might shake the World by magnifying God.