

December 11, 2016
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - 'My Soul Magnifies the Lord'

Ah, Mary. St. Mary. Mother Mary. Virgin Mary. Holy Mary. Ave Maria

As a child, raised in the Catholic tradition I recited the 'Hail Mary' prayer every night before bed, along with the Lord's prayer.

I wonder if you know this prayer if you were not raised Catholic.

The words are quite beautiful and based on Luke's scripture.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.

Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners

Now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

The beautiful 'Ave Maria' we just heard during the offertory was the Latin version of the *Hail Mary* prayer put to music by Franz Schubert in 1845.

The part of the prayer that always stays with me is the image of one who is 'full of grace.'

Grace is something that we talk about, but do not necessarily understand.

I think that Grace is the power of God that nourishes our soul.

Our souls are the spark of the divine that resides in each and every one of us.

It is up to us to magnify that spark so that God's bright light can shine through us.

It is through grace that we can recognize the holiness in others.

Deepak Chopra writes "The fruit of surrender is grace, the all-embracing power of God. Grace, he says, is the invisible influence of the divine. Once it enters a person's life, the old tools that we have used to run our lives—reason, logic, effort, planning, forethought, discipline—are discarded like the training wheels of a bicycle. Grace is unbounded awareness... Grace comes from a clear vision of who you really are."

Mary's beautiful song of joy claims that vision as her own.

She sees herself in a whole new light.

By saying yes to God, she has transformed her view of life.

She has been imbued with hope, as well as joy.

So much of our religious practice and our faith life take place in our minds.

We read scripture looking for meaning, searching for truth.

This Advent, rather than simply think about the Christmas story, I want you to feel it.

I want you to open your heart and soul to the possibility of miracles.

Too often Mary's experience is interpreted in physical terms.

People debate the plausibility of a virgin birth and discount this beautiful story in scientific terms.

This story is not about the specifics of reproduction.

This is a story about miracles.

This is a story about God's power to accomplish things that are beyond our knowledge.

God operates well beyond our imaginations.

We are to hear this story and be overcome with wonder and awe – not questions.

The story of Mary – the young girl and Elizabeth – the older woman, giving birth to God's messenger and God's son are stories meant to remind us that miracles happen.

We discount miracles because to acknowledge them we have to admit to a lack of control.

When we recognize that something is a miracle, it forces us to accept that there is a power greater than ourselves.

But there are so many powers greater than ourselves.

Think about it.

There is hope – a power that sustains people through the direst of circumstances;

Isaiah promised 'the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.'

There is joy – a power that brings the lowly to their feet in dance.

The Magnificat is indeed a lovely expression of joy at God's promises kept, a celebration of the tables being turned, or overturned:

the lowly are lifted up, the proud are brought down, and the hungry are fed.

God remembers the people of Israel and the promises God has made to them.

There is love – a power that often drives people to do things they might never have dreamed of.

Chopra credits the soul with taking God's infinite love and bringing it down to human scale.

The Christmas story is about love.

Mary loved God enough to say yes.

Joseph loved Mary enough to stay.

God loves us enough to send his Son into our midst to teach us how to live.

As Mary stood on the doorstep of Elizabeth's house, she had an epiphany – 'a sudden, intuitive perception of the reality or essential meaning of something.'

After having encountered the angel Gabriel, pondering what this meant and traveling to her cousin Elizabeth's – all of a sudden it made sense.

Deepak Chopra explains "What all epiphanies have in common is that an awareness expands beyond its normal boundaries...an epiphany is about surrender."

When an epiphany occurs, you are caught between two forces.

One, the force of conditioning, pulls you toward a life full of effort and struggle.

The other, the force of the soul, pulls you toward a life that is effortless...if you can bring your attention to the level of the soul, struggle ceases.

The first thing to change is your perspective because it suddenly feels real and right to go beyond all boundaries.

Impossible is possible with God.

To embrace this belief, we must trust God.

We must be able to say yes to God's will for us.

We must be ready to carry out God's work – whatever that might be.

Writing in the fourteenth century, Meister Eckart said: "We are all meant to be mothers of God."

How can you live out that calling?

We have two more weeks of Advent. What might you do to transform your life – to bring attention to your soul, to open yourself to the miracle of epiphanies?

I encourage you to look for miracles around you.

Write them down on a piece of paper and read them on Christmas morning.

God is sending us gifts all of the time.

If we choose to notice this, to accept God's grace as it unfolds in our lives, we too will be able to sing with joy "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."