



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Magnifying the Lord to Hope and Joy

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 18, 2016
The 4th Sunday of Advent —Based on Matthew 1:18-25*

During the modern era we have heard some astounding, earth-shaking, life-altering announcements:

"Lindbergh flies solo across the Atlantic"; "V-E Day"; "V-J Day!"; "JFK Assassinated!"; "ML King Assassinated!"; "Man Walks on Moon!"; "The Mets Win the World Series!"; "It's a Boy!; It's a Girl!"; "The End of the Cold War"; "The Berlin Wall Comes Down"; "The World Trade Centers Have Been Hit!"

But all of those announcements rolled into one don't begin to touch the announcement given to Mary and Joseph by the angel: "You will bear a son and shall call him Emmanuel, which means God with us." The Annunciation to Mary—that she is to be "Theotokos," the God-bearer ... that she is to bear a son, and she is to call him Jesus ... and that he will be called great and the "Son of the most high"—causes her to sing a new song: "My soul magnifies the Lord."

That news has had more effect on individual lives and world history than all of the other announcements put together.

A number of years ago I was leading a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands, and while I was there, I purchased an olive wood set of the Nativity, of the Holy Family. When I arrived at the airport in Tel Aviv for the return to the United States, security was especially high. The customs officials carefully checked all of my bags. They took particular interest in the nativity figures, examining them, handing each character, prompting the dogs to sniff them, and then sending them thru the X-ray machine. Then almost apologetically, the lead officer said to me: "We can't take any chances; we can't be too careful, we have to make sure that there is nothing dangerous here."

The great irony, of course, was that cautious official was handling figures symbolizing the most life-altering and, some would say, "dangerous" reality the world has ever known. As Flannery O'Connor once said, "The Christian faith is a risky leap, not an electric blanket." So, what's Mary's response: "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be to me according to your word..."

Theologian Meister Eckhart, a 14th century German Christian mystic once uttered: "The first line of the *Magnificat* literally means, 'My soul makes God bigger.' What good is it to me if Mary and Joseph gave birth to the son of God 1,400 years ago and I do not also give birth to the son of God in my time and in my culture? We are all, male and female, meant to be mothers of God ... to magnify the Lord in our own day."

Several times during my ordained ministry I have chosen in a weak moment to go Christmas caroling with early adolescents. As we traveled from house to house, they proved to be a lot more interested in each other's body parts than in singing to an elderly person. On one occasion, however, following a half-baked rendition of "Away in a Manger" and the mortal wounding of "Angels We Have Heard on High"—and in the midst of nervous chortling—one venerable lady looked into the eyes of each teen and let them know how appreciative she was of their visit. Then, from her memory, she recited the *Magnificat*. In hush and awe, we carolers knew in that moment something of the Annunciation: that elderly woman had become a "God-bearer," a "Theotokos," a magnifier of the Lord.

Likewise, when we hear the bell ringing around the red pot outside the department stores, we think of God's

generosity and ours. Last week I was walking up Lexington to attend a meeting. I was dressed in clericals and was looking quite priestly. As I approached Bloomingdale's store, I saw a beautiful African-American woman standing behind the red pot, ringing the bell. I was wondering: How do I get around her and the pot without the ringer catching my eye—so that I do not have to face her mixed desires and my layers of guilt? But as I was thinking these things, she caught my eye, and gave me that "I know you want to give" smile. It's not an accusing smile that in essence is saying, "I caught you trying to get by me." It's not a bewildered smile that says, "Give or I'll break your heart." No, it's a genuine, Christ-like smile that communicates that I am worthy and so are the people the Salvation Army is trying to help. There on the sidewalk outside of Bloomingdale's, I extended my offering into the bucket, and I met a "God-bearer," a "Theotokos," one who magnified the Lord.

Again, as I hold up the Sunday News insert and invite you to look inside, I hasten to point out the many "God-bearers" who are listed inside, magnifying God's presence through a myriad of missions and ministries.

Across all the pages of scripture the question rings, "Is anything too hard for God?" All creation holds its collective breath when the angel comes to Mary and Joseph and tells them they will bear a son and they shall call him Emmanuel, God with us. Well, they both say "yes." What do we say?

In W. H. Auden's Christmas Oratorio, "For the Time Being," the chorus exclaims,

"We who must die demand a miracle.
How could the Eternal do a temporal act,
The Infinite become a finite fact?
Nothing can save us that is possible:
We who must die demand a miracle.
Remembering the Stable,
Where for once everything,
Everything in our lives became a 'you' and nothing remains an 'it.' "

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