

"Mary's Magnifying Glass"

Luke 1:46-55

A Sermon by Dr. Jim Davis

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This morning I want to show you something. I think most of you will recognize it even though it's not the traditional shape! It's a magnifying glass. No one knows exactly who first made one. But somewhere in the centuries before the birth of Christ, someone did. Perhaps it was a Persian, or maybe a Greek. But as usual, it was the Romans who took the discovery and made something practical out of it.

They used it to make devices that enabled a person to read small or faded writing. And as they did, they used a word to talk about what they were doing. They used the word *magnificare*. It's the same word the first Roman Christians used in their translations of Luke chapter one. So Mary's prayer became known as the *Magnificat*.

Centuries later, in the Renaissance, three men from the Netherlands took the Romans' invention and refined it still further. They used it to make something they called a telescope. But it was another Italian named Galileo, who popularized the invention. He used it, he said, to bring the stars closer.

And as they grew closer, our knowledge about them grew too. And it's still growing. In 1990 the Hubble Telescope was carried into orbit by the space shuttle *Discovery*. In the last twenty years distant stars much too small to be seen by the human eye have been brought into focus for us by the Hubble Telescope.

Actually though, that statement's not quite accurate, because for the first four years after its launch, the telescope didn't really work. Its images were flawed because its magnifying glass was ground too flat near the edges. The error was less than 3 microns. And a micron, if you didn't know is a millionth of a meter. That's a pretty small amount. But it was enough to stop the telescope from seeing what it was meant to see.

And that was ironic, because it reminded people that the man for whom the telescope was named, Edwin Hubble, was himself a brilliant but flawed man. Let me tell you something more about him.

Only a few people have probably ever had as many natural gifts or as many

human achievements as Edwin Hubble. Growing up, he was an amazing athlete. At a single high school track meet, he once won the pole vault, the shot put, the discus toss, the hammer throw, the standing high jump, the high jump, and the mile-relay race. That's seven first place finishes in one track meet!

If that wasn't enough, Hubble was also handsome, articulate, musical and incredibly brilliant. He studied physics and astronomy at the University of Chicago. Then at the end of his undergraduate studies, he was selected to be one of the first Rhodes scholars. Later he worked as one of the principal astronomers at the Mount Wilson Observatory in California.

Five years after he began his work there, Hubble took the observations and calculations he had made and wrote a landmark scientific paper. The paper proved the universe was composed of not just one, but many galaxies. It was a remarkable achievement. But for Hubble it wasn't enough.

Shortly after presenting his paper, Hubble told a newspaper reporter that before he came to the Observatory, he spent four years working for a law firm. But the truth was he spent those years teaching high school in Indiana. He said that in World War I he led "frightened men to safety on the battlefields of France." But the truth was, he arrived in France just one month before the Armistice was signed and never fought in a battle. He said he'd once beaten a famous boxer in an exhibition match. But no record of the match existed.

You see, the lens of Hubble's life was flawed by a human imperfection called pride. By exaggerating his accomplishments, he blurred a public image that otherwise might have been brilliant. But that's the way it is with our lives. They always magnify something. And sometimes the something they magnify is something that's not very flattering.

But according to Luke, a young woman named Mary once said, "My soul magnifies the Lord ..." And those words, for me at least, always bring up a question. The question is actually a simple one. How did she do it? What was it about Mary's soul that allowed it to see God in a bigger way than you or I usually do?

And whenever I ask that question, I always keep coming back to the same answer. It's the answer that grows out of the story that we read this morning. It's the answer that grows out of the essence of Mary's life, out of her soul. And in a word, it's humility. You see, I'm convinced, Mary's humility was her magnifying glass. It was the element in her life that let God grow bigger for her.

I read a couple of paragraphs last week. They were part of an Advent

devotional. Not the one we're reading here in our church. No this one came from another church. And to be honest, the reason I read it was because it was written by someone I knew. Someone I went to seminary with. His name is Mel Lawrenz. Listen to what he writes.

"We live," he writes, "in an age of shrinking souls. But that's the perfect reason to take Christmas seriously as our best hope; our best hope to be able to see more of God's greatness."

Now I have to tell you, friends, I think that's right. I think we do live in an age of shrinking souls, of souls that are meant to act like telescopes. For our souls are meant to reach out and help us see more of God's greatness. But so often they don't. Because they become flawed by the distortions and exaggerations of pride. So instead of acting like telescopes, our souls end up working like a microscopes.

Do you know the difference between a microscope and a telescope? They're both magnifying glasses. But the difference is this. A microscope takes something that is truly very small and makes it large enough to see. And a telescope takes that is truly very large, and makes its true size become visible to us.

And here's the hard truth about us my friends, about you and me. Our souls are magnifying glasses. They always magnify something. But most of the time we use them like microscopes, looking down into our own lives, trying to magnify something, anything to give ourselves a greater sense of self-worth.

Have you ever heard about a behavior psychologists call a state of "illusory superiority." Over the last few years, research has shown that men and women consistently tend to exaggerate their ability. For instance, when researchers asked a thousand high school students how well they got along with their peers, none of the students rated themselves below average. In fact, 60 percent of the students the researchers talked to believed they were excellent at relating to their peers!

You might think teachers would have a little more self-insight. But you'd be wrong! For when the same researchers asked a thousand professors to rank their own teaching ability. And do you know what they found? They found that only 2 percent rated themselves below average. 10 percent said they were average.

And 88 percent believed they were clearly above average. The researchers decided they would call this finding "The Lake Wobegone" effect because, as most people know in Lake Wobegon, as Garrison Keillor says every week on his

radio program, "all the children are above average."

But no matter what you call it, the conclusion remains. Dr. Mark McMinn, a psychology professor talks about it in a book he's recently written. Research has demonstrated, he says, that the human psyche or soul is fundamentally flawed when it comes to self-perception. "One of the clearest conclusions of social science research in the last decade," he writes, "is that all human beings are proud of ourselves."

And we are. But we don't have to stay that way. We don't have to stay focused on ourselves. We don't have to stay focused on our own perceived abilities or our own overstated achievements. You see part of the miracle of Christmas is a gracious moment in the life of a human being named Mary. And the miracle is this. At a significant moment in her life, Mary chose to use the magnifying mirror of her soul not as a microscope but as a telescope.

She had a lot of reasons to do just the opposite. She had a lot of reasons to let pride blur her vision and obscure her view of what God was doing. But she didn't do that. Instead she let humility open the lens of the telescope in her soul. And she looked beyond herself and the circumstances of her own life, and suddenly she saw it. She saw God's whole plan of salvation opening up in front of her.

It was a plan for her salvation. And her spirit rejoices "in God my Savior." But then she realized. It was not only a plan for her. It was also a plan for the world. It was God's plan to lift up the poor and ignore the rich, to satisfy the hungry and ignore the self-satisfied, to exalt the humble and ignore the proud. It was all part of God's plan and suddenly in her humility, Mary could see it.

So if you take away anything from the sermon this morning, take away this. Take away this truth. Your soul is a magnifying glass. But don't use it like a microscope. Instead learn to use it like a telescope. Do what Mary did. Let the image of what God is doing in and through the birth of His Son grow larger and larger in your soul. And the miracle of Christmas will become more and more visible to you.

Let's pray ...