

St. Clement's Episcopal Church

423 West 46th Street

New York, New York 10036

The Fourth Sunday of Advent (C)

December 19, 2021

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

DRAFT

“Insignificant?”

The Holy Gospel according to

Luke 1:39-55

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth

heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices 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. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Mighty God, Lord of Lords, you have made your power known in the incarnation of your Son Jesus Christ in his young mother Mary. Come and be with us again and give us the capacity to overcome doubt as you did to Mother Mary. Amen.

Last Sunday my wife Janice and I had lunch with a Senior Warden from another church who had gone to Columbia University for his BA degree. He said that as a first year freshman at their first meeting with the President of the student government at Columbia University that they were asked to hold up their hands if they had applied to

Harvard but did not get in. All hands went up. The student president continued, “Now we all know why we are here.”

Even students at Columbia University can be outcasts. Ha.

When I applied to graduate schools, I interviewed at Rockefeller University in Manhattan, some say a notch above Harvard, who thought a kid from Knoxville, Tennessee, would be lost in a big city. So instead I did my PhD at Harvard. By the way, I have lived on the east side, the outcast side, since 1974. And now I am a student at a medical school outside of the

United States in Antigua in the Caribbean. I also applied to Harvard. Ha.

So maybe I am among some others here who may feel they are a bit of the outcast, I don't really know, but it to you that maybe feeling a bit outcast, my remarks may have some resonance. (I did go to Harvard for my PhD and MBA, but not the college—I didn't even apply, and I also didn't even apply to Columbia. Woo woo)

The story of Christmas is a story of outcasts. Jesus was born to an insignificant family in an insignificant country, Israel, and grew up insignificantly in an insignificant town called Nazareth. One of

Jesus' relatives was slightly significant since his relative's husband Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, served once a year at the Jerusalem Temple, but only once a year.

But by and large, the story of Christmas is about an otherwise insignificant person, Jesus, who grew up and was named by God the Father as His only Son. Wow.

So the Holy Spirit does amazing things. From very little came the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

“And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord’”, Luke 1:46. What does the word in Greek mean, magnify? Magnify comes from the Greek verb, “megalunō”, which

means “to cause to be large, to make large/long” or “to cause to be held in greater esteem through praise or deeds, exalt, glorify, magnify.” So in this verse magnify means “to exalt” or “to glorify”.

So how do we glorify God? By giving of our best? By doing our best? By offering our best? to and for God. Maybe our best is to be a friend of the friendless. Maybe our best is to help the helpless. Maybe our best is simply to give God praise through song and music. How do we give our best?

Mary saw in that little insignificant baby that the prophecy of the Messiah has been made true and lively, and alive. That little

baby would be the salvation of all the world, the Savior, Christ the Lord.

Pastor Mark Ellingsen writes:

“Americans don’t ‘do’ humility very well.

We want the big house, the ritzy car, and the latest fashions in order to call attention to ourselves. Accumulating all these “things” and accolades does not make for much happiness. It is like Benjamin Whichcote once said: “None are so empty as those who are full of themselves.” Mary’s humility is apparent in this lesson. Rick Warren has it right: “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of yourself less.”

Former Mormon President James E. Faust

relates humility to gratitude. The humility of Mary and of any faithful man or woman is just a matter of focusing on God more than on yourself, Faust asserts. In that spirit Martin Luther proclaimed: “Be modest and shy about your own works; but when God’s Promise is concerned you should have no modesty”

Being insignificant does not mean we are not doing significant things. Some will do anything for significance, even heinous crime; yet others focus on selflessness, consider Mother Teresa.

Pastor Ron Love writes,

“In a comic strip that appears regularly in the Sunday newspaper, a man is greeted by his wife as he arrives home. He is obviously frazzled and exhausted, spent from the day's demands. He offers this confession, "I tried to seize the day, but it fought back." "I tried to seize the day, but it fought back." Life is often a wrestling match, overpowering us to the position that our shoulders are pinned to the mat, down for the count. It is helpful to remember that above us will always be the door to the kingdom and our hope for a new day in the morning.”

<https://www.thefarside.com/2021/12/18/0>

Charles Schulz in his Peanuts comic strip offered several points of wisdom: "Keep looking up... that's the secret of life."

"Learn from yesterday, live for today, look to tomorrow, rest this afternoon."

"Christmas is doing a little something extra for someone."

"Don't worry about the world coming to an end today. It's already tomorrow in Australia."

The newest covid variant, Omicron, has hit the zero on our charts again, directly in the center of where we were beginning to

feel safe again. Down came the masks. Up went the vaxes. Now this. Omicron.

There is some speculation among scientists that the covid plague will entitle us to get annual covid vaccinations against it if not more frequently. It is a tricky virus that harbors in one unvaccinated person slightly resistant to the old variant, I am told, and then covid mutates until it does that person in. Then it moves on to better prospects as the newest variant on the block.

In my medical school, we are sometimes tested in subject matter daily, sometimes every three or four weeks, and of course, something we learned two years ago comes

back to haunt us. Grades matter a lot. But what they are training us to be is on our toes at all times. Disease never makes a completely obvious move, so we are set to discern what is the most likely thing a person may have just by their age, sex, body build, race, and general appearance; even by how they walk into the examination room, our eyes are cued to look for clues.

Sometimes, if not more often, it is the insignificant sign or symptom that we are to discern, sometimes it is even life or death.

What is hidden, what is undiscovered, is often the deadliest, sorry to say, not to make everyone here paranoid, but of course we

medical students say, ‘Oh dear, I have that sign, that symptom’, but I diverge. Our heart, for example, has insignificantly small groups of cells, called the “nodes”, which transmit electrical signals at the same speed whether we are sick or whether we are well. One set, the AV node tells our heart to beat 120 beats a minute, but we have a nerve called the vagus nerve that slows our heart down to a more reasonable 60 to 80 beats a minute. But we have three back up nodes that beat at slower rates, one between 40 and 60, one between 20 and 40, and one that keeps on keeping on at about 15 beats a minute no matter what. The blood pump is

so precious and irreplaceable that we have developed multiple backup systems to be sure it keeps pumping. It is actually quite amazing, when you think about it. But it is in the synchronization of these nodes that determine whether we have a healthy or an unhealthy heart. And we can tell this by our pulse rate. Isn't that amazing? Problems occur when other cells in our heart suddenly develop signals or reflections of signals all on their own--we are not exactly sure why, but when these extra beats try to take over the heart, we get palpitations, racing hearts, slower hearts, and even quivering hearts that need to be 'defibrillated'. Thus in most

department stores, schools, and elsewhere, there are defibrillators now hanging on walls to resuscitate someone who collapses due to heart failure. They are not magical, but they determine automatically what our heart is doing and then by algorithm determine what sort of electrical current would most likely reset the heart's normal rhythm. And everything depends on these tiny seemingly insignificant nodes inside our heart walls. But they actually determine life or death.

I am in training to be an Instructor for Advanced Cardiopulmonary Life Support. I will be able to train doctors, nurses, and others how to resuscitate someone whose

heart is either stopped completely, asystole, or whose cardiac nodes are behaving badly, tachycardia--beating too fast, or bradycardia--beating too slowly. And my training is all to discern what a few hundred little cells inside a person's heart are doing and what will correct them if necessary. It is not 'rocket science' as they say, but we have to keep a heart pumping without any skips more than about three minutes. CPR some call it, but in a slightly more advanced way. Those most insignificant parts of our body determine life or death, health or illness.

When the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and she became pregnant, that is a miracle

no doctor or scientist knows how to do. It is an impossible thing to happen, yet in one in a hundred trillion people, Mary became pregnant, with a baby boy, so insignificant, yet so profoundly significant when he grew up.

So this insignificant birth to an insignificant little girl in an insignificant bed of hay in an insignificant inn, in an insignificant country, in an insignificant time, became the real Master of the Universe as he always actually was from the beginning even before his human birth. It boggles the mind.

But if God can do such significant work in the world with nothing, imagine what God can do with you and me.

So never feel insignificant. You were put here for a special reason. And in this Season of Advent we are preparing for the most significant event of all time on planet Earth.

Give God all the glory for our insignificance that God will turn into some good no one else on Planet Earth has ever done. What we do may seem insignificant, but what we do will make a profound impact on the world forever. Let God be our guide.

Amen.

Description: What God had happen in an insignificant little girl called Mary made the most profound impact on Planet Earth that has never before or after been witnessed. Insignificant people always do significant good in the world with God's wise guidance.

Words pointers: God, Jesus, Mary, insignificant, significant, heart, nodes, defibrillation, omicron, covid, variants, pulse, Peanuts, Schulz, magnify, glorify, exalt

An earlier sermon:

In August 1942 there is a story told about Leningrad, now called, St. Petersburg, Russia, as it was about to be overrun by the Nazi army in World War II. Three months later, the Nazis had still not taken the city.

<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/leningrad.htm>

In the interim, the Battle of another Russian city, Stalingrad, was being fought with perhaps the greatest casualty figures of any single battle in the history of warfare (estimates are between 1,250,000[15] and

1,798,619[16])>>>[1.2 and 1.8 million people died]. The Battle of Stalingrad became a titanic struggle between Hitler and Stalin as both saw it of great propaganda value, each keenly aware of the namesake of the city, and each poured hundreds of thousands of men into the battle.

The battle of Stalingrad began on August 23, 1942, in parallel with the battle to take Leningrad, and on the same day, the city of Stalingrad suffered heavy aerial bombardment that reduced most of it to rubble. By September 1942, the fighting reached the city center. Stalingrad was completely destroyed during the war. <>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volgograd>

At the same time of the battle of Stalingrad, in a second front Hitler's forces began to apply great pressure against Leningrad, the city whose name today is St. Petersburg, Russia.

In Leningrad, St. Petersburg, an eyewitness in the city at the time of the siege wrote: "It was horrific. The siege of Leningrad (the modern-day St. Petersburg) lasted almost two and one-half years and cost the lives of an estimated almost 1,000,000 city residents. <> (The German siege of Leningrad lasted 900 days from

September, 1941 to January, 1944. During that time, nearly a third of the population at the siege's beginning, starved to death.

Roughly one in three died.)

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-2032706/BEYOND-HORROR-They-ate-cats-sawdust-wallpaper-paste--babies-Leningrads-agony-Nazis-tried-starve-submission-LENINGRAD-TRAGEDY-OF-A-CITY-UNDER-SIEGE-1941-44-BY-ANNA-REID.html>

In her book, “LENINGRAD: TRAGEDY OF A CITY UNDER SIEGE 1941-44” BY ANNA REID,

[Read more:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-2032706/BEYOND-HORROR-They-ate-cats-sawdust-wallpaper-paste--babies-Leningrads-agony-Nazis-tried-starve-submission-LENINGRAD-TRAGEDY-OF-A-CITY-UNDER-SIEGE-1941-44-BY-ANNA-REID.html#ixzz3uPU45pE4>

Anna Reid wrote: “They ate cats, sawdust, wallpaper paste...even their own babies.

Leningrad's agony was intense as the Nazis tried to starve it into submission.

Read more:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-2032706/BEYOND-HORROR-They-ate-cats-sawdust-wallpaper-paste--babies-Leningrads-agony-Nazis-tried-starve-submission-LENINGRAD-TRAGEDY-OF-A-CITY-UNDER-SIEGE-1941-44-BY-ANNA-REID.html#ixzz3uPTXn67L>

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-2032706/BEYOND-HORROR-They-ate-cats-sawdust-wallpaper-paste--babies-Leningrads-agony-Nazis-tried-starve-submission-LENINGRAD-TRAGEDY-OF-A-CITY-UNDER-SIEGE-1941-44-BY-ANNA-REID.html>

To compound the misery, the Germans incessantly bombarded the city with air and artillery attacks.

Just prior to this brutal siege of Leningrad, all of the most precious artwork had been removed from Leningrad's great Hermitage museum and put on a train going out of the city just before the German army arrived at the city gates. In the following days there was great suffering and hunger among everyone in Leningrad as all their supply routes were completely cut off by Hitler's army. But the curator of the

Hermitage museum, [I have visited that museum to see the magnificent Faberge Eggs,] the curator of the now art-emptied Hermitage museum got the bright idea of opening its once pristine halls to the nearly starving Russian troops to try to get their minds briefly off the impossibility of the defense of their city, which was being attacked from the south by the Nazi Army and from the north by the German-dominated Army of Finland. The Hermitage museum curator would take groups of disheartened Russian soldiers on guided tours down the museum's once magnificent hallways and pause before each empty

picture frame and explain in elaborate detail just what once had been the outstanding picture in that frame. And he would bring a tiny ray of hope into the combatants fearful and battle wearied hearts as he got them to imagine the return of all these great treasures of art after they had won an impossible victory against an overpowering military force. And as you may gather, the Russians did finally win. By January 1944, the Russian Army had pushed the German Nazi Army [away from] beyond Leningrad allowing the city to celebrate the end of its two and a half year siege.

<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/leningrad.htm>

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/08/hitler-germany-campaign-collapsed>

Reframing often works to give us new hope, and new energy in times of strife, terror, and uncertainty. There was a tremendous amount of terror and uncertainty after Jesus died on the cross. His place in the Upper Room was empty. Picture the disciples moving around his place in the Room, looking at where they had just eaten the Last Supper with him, seeing the place

where their Master had reclined with them for that last meal together. Jesus was not there.

In the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth as recounted in today's Gospel from Luke one wonders how it could have been transmitted in the form we now read it. Luke, or whoever was the writer of today's gospel, was not there in Zechariah's house. Peter and the other disciples were not there either. The story says only Mary and old Elizabeth were present. And after John the Baptist appears on the scene many years later, we hear no longer any mention of Elizabeth. Elizabeth had presumably died of

old age long before John's cry in the wilderness and maybe even long before anyone conceived of copying down or memorizing any birth narrative of Jesus. So today's gospel story's repository is solely Mary. Mary herself had to tell the events directly or indirectly to the writer of Luke's gospel, or, possibly as many scholars say, Luke simply made it all up, concocted all of it. One cannot prove that concoction did not occur, nor can one prove that it did occur. I will offer an alternate explanation as that by saying I can conceive of this story being told by Mary in the Upper Room as the disciples cowered from fear of the Jewish authorities

after Jesus' crucifixion. The time was very bleak for all of Jesus' followers, whose Master had died on the cruel cross. But Mary knew her own miraculous story, and likely Mary had even put it to her own crude music--music helps one to remember things as they were. The miracle she had experienced at Jesus' birth was Mary's special and personal miracle, known to her alone, and perhaps to her kinswoman, Elizabeth. But now in the Upper Room, that very song of hers she sang perhaps as a eulogy of her son Jesus, Mary's song, the Magnificat, reframed the situation for the other disciples. Mary too was very

disturbed about her son's death on the cross and his absence. And who knows whom the Romans and Jewish leaders would reach out to kill next. But she just could not get it out of her head how the whole thing had started for her and her tiny fetus--first an angel had appeared to her to announce the impossible pregnancy; and then shortly thereafter the six month old fetus of John the Baptist in Elizabeth's womb miraculously knew the story just as the angel had told it, without having had any contact with the angel and certainly without having any form of mature communication ability--John was a six month old fetus, for heaven's sake. I can

hear Mary trying to piece the whole pregnancy thing together with the disciples listening so intently that you could hear the drop of a pin. It was a glimmer of hope in a sea of hopelessness following Jesus' death on the cross. No one expected Jesus would die such a young death. And absolutely no one expected he could overcome the grave. But Mother Mary's story in song gave them all some sense of comfort that totally miraculous things were part and parcel of Jesus' amazing life from his very conception. And this amazing story of Mother Mary at least briefly took the

disciples' minds off the horrors of Jesus' excruciating death by suffocation.

Some see the song of Mary as being a key rallying call to the despondent disciples of Christ as they met in the upper room following his death. Mary's story in today's Gospel lesson was a very private one that only Mary's kinswoman Elizabeth would have heard. The writer of the Gospel of Luke would have had no source for his story because it was so private, so personal, that no scribe could have recorded it because no scribe was there to hear her sing her song for the first time. So some other time Mary

must have recounted the miraculous story of how the angel Gabriel has spoken to her and she had accepted the gift of becoming the Savior's mother--and why not there in the Upper Room where there was so much dejection, defeat, and depression? Mary's song would have been the perfect antidote for the disciples. So she could have sung it again for them.

There in that upper room where there was the empty place Jesus had been reclining for the Last Supper before he was apprehended and crucified, that empty space, that empty frame was staring all of them in the eye. Their Master was gone. Many had

witnessed his horrific death, and were even witnesses to his side being pierced by the Roman soldier's spear, and blood and water flowing out, assuring all that the One in who they had put their trust was indeed dead.

Maybe in your mind's eye you can see Mary in that upper room telling the trembling disciples this miraculous of miraculous pregnancy story she had personally experienced. She herself had to make sense of all that had happened to her firstborn son at bloody Calvary hill. And she offered to her son's disciples this otherworldly story of her very young life in order to do that. And this incredible story

gave the disciples the courage to stick it out until their Lord reappeared to them, bidding them, “Do not be afraid” as he showed them his pierced hands and his punctured side.

The victory they needed was to overcome their momentary disbelief following the Master’s untimely death at the hands of the Roman executioners. The victory they needed was to see a reframing of their missing martyr’s reclining and eating place. The victory they needed was to see beyond the momentary loss of their Beloved Master to his promised return. Mary’s recounting of her spontaneous story of great joy shed a light of a new hope-filled perspective for all

of them. The disciples were being prepared for the return of their Lord from death, an even greater miracle than his birth from a virgin mother.

Maybe this Advent and Christmas season has brought you another of those episodes of hopelessness and loneliness--the world says spend, spend, spend, and you don't have a dime more to do that with. The world says jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle bells, and you think, bah humbug, Christmas is only for kids, it is not for grownups. And your very soul seems to be shriveling up and ready to die, if it hasn't already. The wars may have

gotten you down. The stock market may have gotten you down. The lack of employment may have gotten you down. Terrorism may have gotten you down. Something may have gotten you down. And now you have to suddenly rally spiritually and conceive again in your skeptical heart that a virgin bore a baby. It is just too much.

Christ our Lord is miraculously risen. We will celebrate his wonderful birth momentarily. And he will one day amazingly appear again, a second time, this time in great power to raise the living and the dead. Christ's birth was only the

beginning. His resurrection was only the beginning. The rest will continue to amaze us as miracles come to our lives on a daily basis between now and his second coming. We can bless the Lord. Our souls can magnify the Lord. The Mighty One has done great things for us, just as God did for Elizabeth and Jesus' mother Mary.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Amen.