

Title: The *Magnificat*
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Date: 5 Dec 2008
Source: <http://www.eco-justice.org/E-081205.asp>

An Advent learning arrived as an unexpectedly blessing. A few memorable moments in a theater gave me insights into both good ecological theology and good stage direction.

I was putting in some volunteer time with the stage crew for a production of a Christmas play. Like so many similar plays, it was based on a great story idea (the Gospel according to Luke), and generally got weaker the farther it strayed from the original text.

Early on in the script, Mary gets the astonishing news of her pregnancy. Recognizing that some wording just can't be improved, the playwright has the young woman recite the full text of the *Magnificat*, that wonderful poem found in the first chapter of Luke.

The college student playing the part of Mary was experienced in the theater arts, but not well versed in Christianity. She had her lines memorized perfectly, but the delivery missed the point. Her rendition started off like this:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and **my** spirit rejoices in God **my** Savior, ...
Surely, from now on all generations will call **me** blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for **me**.
That's when the director shouted "Stop! Stop!" from the side of the stage. The cast and crew were told to take a break while some intense coaching went on in a side room.

A few minutes later, Mary came back to the stage for a second try. Every word was the same, and yet the meaning was utterly transformed:

My soul magnifies the **Lord**,
and my spirit rejoices in **God** my **Savior**, ...
Surely, from now on **all generations** will call me **blessed**;
for the Mighty One has done **great things** for me.
The transformation was astonishing. No longer did we see a proud and strutting girl. Rather, Mary radiated humility, and her recitation was filled with praise. The arrogance went away, and we heard Mary's amazement that this thing had happened to her.

Those of us who were present at that first rehearsal were given a very special gift by those few moments of directorial intervention. We could witness the "before" and "after" in Mary's recitation, and see the vivid difference of shifting the focus. The audience at the public production only saw the polished final result.

In all the years since that evening, I have never been able to hear the *Magnificat* without remembering the crucial importance of placing the emphasis correctly. The story has a whole different point, depending on whether it is seen as all about **me**, or all about **God**.

Take that lesson, and write it very large. What the college actress did to ten verses from Luke, far too many people do to the whole Bible. They get fixated on the **me** and the **us**, and the focus slides away from **God**.

There are many who can't hear, can't speak, can't feel the messages about caring for all of God's creation, because they're so thoroughly wrapped up in God's relationship with humanity. God's love for all things gets lost when such an overwhelming emphasis is placed on God's love for people.

The creation stories get hopelessly warped when we read them with pride. From Genesis 1, we hear "God created **humankind** in God's image" when it should be "**God** created humankind in **God's** image."

When we think it is all about **us**, we mishear the classic text of John 3:16. We think it says, "For God so loved **us**," the **people**. But it really says, "For God so loved the **world**," the **cosmos**, the whole creation.

It doesn't take much to destroy the meaning of the text. When the woman playing Mary first said her lines, it was repugnant. A gloating Virgin poisoned the wondrous Christmas story. The exact same words with a new emphasis opened up profound spiritual insight.

The charge is frequently leveled that Christianity is an anthropocentric religion, and that our theological heritage has made it all too easy for us to be complicit in the rape of the global environment. There is a goodly amount of truth in that charge.

But it is also true that large pieces of our tradition are ecologically sensitive, ethically responsible, creation affirming, and utterly opposed to the sort of abuse and exploitation that our species has inflicted on this planet. Too often, though, that message has been missed when the emphasis is shifted in reading our sacred texts. Our pride and arrogance have distorted words of grace and healing, and turned them into self-serving travesties.

Let's all try to take the director's instructions to heart. As we read scripture, place the emphasis on God, on God's love, and on the way that love encompasses the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, and all of creation. Taking the emphasis off of the rich, the powerful, the "chosen" and ourselves will reveal a new and deeper meaning.

It is a transforming exercise that can restore our relationship with God and the creation.

Rev. Peter Sawtell is Executive Director of Eco-Justice Ministries. Please feel free to forward this message to others. This article, and all back copies of Eco-Justice Notes, is [archived on our website](#).

A practical note to worship leaders: The Magnificat *always* appears as an Advent reading in the Revised Common Lectionary. It is all too easy for readers to fall into the self-centered emphasis, and destroy the meaning of this remarkable text. I encourage you to share this copy of *Notes* with the person who will be doing the Gospel reading for your congregation's services.