

“Mary’s Song”

Third in a series of messages on “The Songs of Advent”

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December 12, 2010

Luke 1:39-55

The good news of God’s coming to us in Jesus is something that is so wonderful, it just has to be sung about. What would Christmas be without Christmas carols, Handel’s *Messiah*, and, of course, MPC’s Christmas Cantata? Indeed, many of us are still basking in the glow of the cantata – *The Voices of Christmas* - which was a great blessing to the 900 people who attended.

What would you say is the oldest Christmas Carol? We might think of “*Silent Night?*” (1816) or “*Hark! The Herald Angels Sing?*” (1739) or “*Frosty the Snowman (!)*” (1950). In fact, the oldest Christmas carol was sung by none other than the mother of our Lord herself, predating “*Silent Night*” by nearly 1900 years.

It is called the *Magnificat* – which is the first word of her song in Latin, from which we get our word “magnify” - “*My soul magnifies the Lord.*” The song is found in Luke 1:

Mary Visits Elizabeth

³⁹ At that time [a pregnant] Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”

Mary’s Song

⁴⁶ And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,
 remembering to be merciful
 55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,
 even as he said to our fathers.”¹

This hymn sung by Mary is a true classic, and holds a special place in church history. In some traditions this song is sung every day during the evening prayer.

Why is this song so important? Because it reminds us of who God is and of what God cares about. Our God is amazing; God works in mysterious and surprising ways to save his people—ways directly counter to what we would expect.

No one was more surprised than Mary, herself. She was overcome by the fact that the Lord should appoint her, of all people, to this special role in his plan. She was simply amazed the Lord should have had such regard for her, given her humble station in life.

Who was Mary? She was a poor young peasant woman – about 14 years of age – one of the humblest citizens of the village of Nazareth, and Nazareth was nothing more than a small hamlet. The most striking thing about her was her very ordinariness. She was not a queen, or a princess, or the daughter of an important government official or religious leader. We don't know if she was even especially beautiful – though virtually every artist renders her as so. Who knows, maybe she was quite homely...

We can imagine Mary's own inner conversation in her encounter with the angel Gabriel, who announced to her that she would bear a son who would be the Savior of the world. *“Who am I to be favored so by God? Me, a simple woman of no account? What could the Lord of heaven and earth possibly have to do with me?”*

But unlike the old priest Zechariah, who responded to the angelic news with skepticism and doubt - with little or no expectation that God would actually fulfill his promises - Mary responded with beautiful faith and with a gracious and humble spirit: *“May it be to me as you have said. I am the Lord's servant...”* Whether Mary was physically beautiful or not, she possessed an inner beauty of spirit. She was responsive to the will of God. She believed that God was doing a new thing in the world, and it was beginning with her -*imagine that!* All she can do is praise God, in a spirit of wonder and gratitude:

My soul glorifies the Lord
 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 48 for he has been mindful
 of the humble state of his servant.
 From now on all generations will call me blessed,
 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
 holy is his name.

¹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Lk 1:39–55). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

How strange of God.

—If God had wanted wealth for his Son, he could have arranged it.

—If God had wanted power for his Son, it would have been done.

—If God had wanted Jesus to be born in the lap of luxury, he had only to say the word.

—If God had wanted Jesus to be born in the upper class, he had hundreds of homes to choose from.

—If God had wanted education, or elite schooling, or the proper social connections, or any of the other things we usually associate with success, it would have been done.ⁱ

But God didn't do it that way! And that is the wonder of Christmas! By coming into the world as he did, by choosing Mary and being born in the humblest of circumstances, God showed his continuing regard for the "little people" of this world— all the "nobodies" who live and love and labor and suffer and die in obscurity. It was no accident that the announcement of Jesus' birth should go first of all to some shepherds – of all people – the lowest class of society – the lowest of the low.

The message is clear: God cares especially about "nobodies" - the hungry and the poor and the weak and the vulnerable. He cares about widows and orphans and those whom others have deemed to be of little worth. God looks with special favor upon those who are overlooked and who are forgotten or who are treated with derision and contempt. He champions the cause of those who are taken advantage of by the rich and powerful. In fact, God takes delight in lifting the lowly and making nobodies "somebodies."

On the other hand, those who think they are "somebody" – those who look down on others and are so full of themselves that they have no room to care for other people or to treat others with dignity or respect – are brought low and are sent scampering away.

In fact, the second part of Mary's song sounds downright revolutionary. Mary knew her scripture and she sounds like an Old Testament prophet:

⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

The Roman oppressors and the Herod's of this world, the fat cats and the powerful movers and shakers who lived in the lap of luxury while ignoring the beggars at their gates, wouldn't have taken kindly to a song like this. Mary just might have been arrested for subversive activity. These were and are dangerous words. They seem to call for a moral and a social and an economic revolution, threatening the powers that be. In fact, E. Stanley Jones, the famous Methodist pastor and missionary, called Mary's

Song the most revolutionary document in the world. God's coming into the world sparks a revolution to be sure, the kingdom of God invading the kingdoms of this world - turning many of the world's values on their head. But it is a revolution that is fought not with armies, but with deeds of love.

You wouldn't expect these words to be coming from the lips of sweet gentle Mary. She wasn't dumb. She knew what was going on. She in effect announced the focus of Jesus' ministry – on lifting the lowly, honoring the humble, feeding the hungry – even while he was still in the womb. She knew more than we might think about this special child of hers. She was inspired by the Holy Spirit.

One of the most popular contemporary Christmas songs is “Mary Did You Know?” written by Mark Lowry. It's a beautiful song. It asks a series of questions of Mary:

*Mary did you know that your baby boy will one day walk on water?
Mary did you know that your baby boy will save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?
This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you.*

*Mary did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man?
Mary did you know that your baby boy will calm a storm with his hand?
Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?
And when you kiss your little baby, you have kissed the face of God.*

*The blind will see, the deaf will hear and the dead will live again.
The lame will leap, the dumb will speak, the praises of the lamb.*

*Mary did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?
Mary did you know that your baby boy will one day rule the nations?
Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect Lamb?
This sleeping child you're holding is the great I am.*

Did Mary know all these things? Her song would indicate that she did indeed. She had a very good understanding of this miracle that God was carrying out through her. And she was amazed that God should care for the likes of her and for all the other “nobodies” on the face of this earth and that the proof of that loving concern was Jesus himself. And she offered herself to God as a servant.

We who know about this baby – we who know Jesus and the salvation he brings – are called to care about those whom God cares about. As servants of God, we, too, are to care for the poor and the hungry, the weak and the vulnerable. We, too, are to be concerned about the disadvantaged and the downtrodden and the needy. We don't have to go looking far; we don't necessarily have to join the Sisters of Charity and make our way to Calcutta.

Speaking of Mother Theresa . . .

It seems that a woman was impressed with the work Mother Theresa was doing in ministering to the dying in the streets of Calcutta. This woman, who lived a long way from India, asked her if she could join

in the work being done by the sisters. *"Find your own Calcutta"* said Mother Theresa. Chances are, our *Calcutta* is right where we live and travel day in and day out. It's the folks closest to us whose needs we are best equipped to meet. Have we loved our neighbor today? Do we even know our neighbor?

Who among our family and friends and acquaintances tends to get overlooked and taken for granted? Who among us tends to be "invisible" and therefore needs some personal attention. Who around us might be feeling hurt and lonely and forgotten? Who among us is down in the dumps and needs their spirits lifted? Can we offer them an encouraging word and a listening ear and a helping hand? It was Mother Theresa who said:

Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody, I think that is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing to eat.

God is calling you and me to participate in Jesus' mission to reach out to nobodies and make them feel like somebodies, beloved as they are by God. How shall we respond to God's call?

We know that we have been blessed. We know that God has been good to us. We sing songs of praise to him with our lips. But can we glorify – can we magnify God – by deeds done in his name, caring for those "little ones" that are so precious to him?

You and I, like Mary, may think that we are unlikely candidates to serve God in a very meaningful way. We may discount our gifts and feel inadequate for the task. We may, in fact, feel like a nobody. But do we believe God or not? Is God unable to make something beautiful of our efforts?

To her credit, Mary believed God. She trusted God to use her in a mighty way. She knew it wouldn't be easy, but the Lord would fulfill his promises to her and to his people.

'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary said to the angel, *"May it be to me as you have said."*

Mary had a humble, gracious spirit, attuned to the Spirit of God in her life. The song she sings shows that she "got it." She knew what she was called to do and she did it. Do we hear the Lord calling *our* name? Are we attuned to his plan and purpose for us? How shall *you and I* respond?

I want to close by saying I have such an appreciation for Mary. I know we Protestants are wary of making too much of her, wanting not to worship her. But she does indeed hold a special place in the salvation story and ought to be held in reverence for her amazing faith and joyful obedience. An Italian Catholic sister wrote a poem entitled "Bellezza," meaning "Beauty" and speaks about God's choice of Mary for a special mission. I close with her words:

*Don't smile, brothers and sisters,
And don't shrug your shoulders:
Our God is fascinating and what he does always surpasses the impossible.
God looked upon a woman and loved her,
And he who loves even before looking at the face seeks the beauty that lies in the heart.
God looked upon a woman who was from the race of the little ones without name,
Those that live far away from palaces -*

*Those who work in kitchens,
Those who come from the numbers of the humble and the forgotten,
Those that never open their mouths and who are accustomed to poverty.
God looked upon her and found her to be beautiful and this woman was joined to him as if she were his
beloved — for life and for death.
From now on all generations will call her blessed.
God looked upon a woman.
Her name was Mary.
As a woman who gives herself, she believed, and during the night, in a grotto, she cried out with pain,
and from her womb God himself was born, bringing with him salvation and peace, like treasures for all
eternity.
As a woman who surrenders herself and never regrets it,
she believed against all the obscurity that enveloped her,
against all the doubts that filled her.
From now on her name will be sung, because God took her and she gave herself to him, she, Mary, one
of us.ⁱⁱ*

ⁱ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1991-12-15-Jesus-The-Revolutionary-Marys-Song/>>

ⁱⁱ <http://saltandlighttv.org/blog/?p=8855>>