

## “Mary’s Song”

Luke 1:46b-55

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What you just heard was a contemporary musical rendition of the song that the Virgin Mary sings when she is pregnant with the child who is the Son of God. There are many different musical versions of that song that Mary sings; that particular one that we just heard was composed about 30 years ago. The lyrics are a paraphrase of Mary’s song from Luke 1; the music is based on a traditional Irish melody. There are many other versions; our choir has sung some of them over the years.

The song that Mary sings is a song of praise to Almighty God. It expresses the depth of her joy at the coming of the Christ child into the world. It is a song about the strength and mercy of God.

Mary, you remember, is a young woman – quite possibly still a teenager – who is engaged to a man named Joseph. They are both Jews; they live in a town in Galilee called Nazareth. Nazareth was an unimportant little town. It is not mentioned anywhere in the Old Testament. It is not mentioned in any other Jewish or secular literature until about two hundred years after the birth of Jesus. There are some modest archaeological remains, but nothing of any great significance – some minor artifacts, some tombs, the remnants of a bathhouse used for ritual purification. The evidence suggests a small Jewish settlement of some 500 people, nestled in a little valley, situated about 90 miles north of Jerusalem and about 15 miles west-south-west of the Sea of Galilee. There was *nothing* of any historic, religious, or cultural significance in Nazareth. There were no legends about Nazareth, no traditions, no expectations that anything important would ever happen in Nazareth. Which is why, in the Gospel of John, one of the early followers of Jesus wonders, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46)

During his lifetime, Jesus came to be known as “Jesus of Nazareth.” That was a title of no significance. It didn’t mean anything important to anybody. It basically meant, “Jesus from nowhere.”

We read in Luke’s gospel that “the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth.” Gabriel was one of God’s most important angels. He shows up in the book of Daniel, and he is also mentioned in other Jewish literature that was written around the time of the New Testament. God sends one of his most *important* angels to one of the most *unimportant* towns in Israel. God sent this mighty angel to a very particular young woman, named Mary, or Miriam – a common Jewish name.

We know practically nothing about Mary’s extended family. Luke tells us that she was related to Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist; possibly they were cousins. There are some later legends that give us the names of Mary’s parents and some stories about her early life. But those legends are not very reliable; the simple fact of the matter is, we know very little about this young woman’s family.

We know a bit more about her fiancée Joseph. Luke tells us that Joseph was “of the house of

David,” that is, he was descended from King David, who lived a thousand years before Mary and Joseph. Luke and Matthew both give us genealogies that trace Joseph’s ancestry all the way back to David and beyond. They don’t quite match; Matthew tells us that Joseph came from a long line of Israelite kings; Luke tells us he came from a long line of commoners; the question is whether Joseph’s lineage goes through David’s son Solomon (who was a king) or David’s son Nathan (who wasn’t). But those details don’t matter much. Matthew also tells us that Joseph was a skilled artisan, like a carpenter.

So we have a perfectly ordinary young Jewish woman, and a fairly ordinary young Jewish man, who are engaged to be married. Then comes the angel, crashing into Mary’s life, turning it upside-down, changing it in a way that has made Mary the most famous woman in all of human history.

“Do not be afraid, Mary,” Gabriel tells her; “you have found favor with God.” The angel’s visit is brief; there are just a few key points in Gabriel’s message to Mary: “you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Regarding Mary’s surprise pregnancy, which did not involve a human father, Gabriel says: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”

Those words are very familiar to us. Perhaps *too* familiar. We have heard them so often, perhaps it’s easy for us to overlook just how incredibly *radical* they are. Fast forward a little bit in the story; Mary goes to visit her relative Elizabeth, who is old and experiencing a surprise pregnancy of her own. When Elizabeth greets Mary at the door, Elizabeth’s child leaps in the womb. Even an unborn baby can recognize the magnificent significance of the child that Mary is carrying in her womb.

It is then that Mary bursts out in song – a song about the strength and mercy of Almighty God.

“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.” The song begins with Mary’s extreme joy over what God is doing in *her* life. God has saved *her*. God has looked with favor on *her*. She is neither rich nor powerful; she is an insignificant peasant in the eyes of the world, but God has seen fit to give *her* the unique privilege of bearing and rearing the very Son of God. She rejoices that *she* is the one chosen for this honor. She “magnifies” the Lord – that’s a fancy word that means to *make something bigger*, like when you look at something in a magnifying glass; or it can mean to *declare something greater*. Something was *good*; now you’ve realized that it’s even *more* good than you thought. That’s the meaning here; Mary already knew that God is good. Now she realizes just *how* good God truly is. She *magnifies* God; she sees God as so much *bigger* and *better* than she had previously imagined. More ... special. More ... *God*.

“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.” Mary is realizing the implications of God’s favor in her life – both *now* and in the *future*. God, who is majestic in holiness, has implanted a holy seed within *her own bosom*. The significance of that is profound. For nine months she has the distinct privilege and responsibility of carrying and nurturing and nourishing the Son of the Most High. Then, for a period of many years, she will have the privilege and responsibility of *raising* this holy child. No other woman has ever had that honor before; no other woman will ever have this honor in the future. Every child is precious, an incredible gift from God; but no other mom has ever or will ever have the responsibility of caring for the Son of the Most High. Mary’s status is unique. She seems to have a sense of how future

generations will view her; she intuitively *knows* that she, among all women, has been especially blessed.

“His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” Mary is not the first to utter words like that; you can find sentiments like that throughout the pages of the Bible, like in Psalm 103: “the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.” (Psalm 103:17-18) Mary is saying nothing new here – except maybe now she’s realizing the profound significance of these words, as she ponders God’s mercy in her *own* life.

“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.” Mary is realizing the tremendous implications of the coming of God’s Son into the world. There are implications for those who are *proud*, implications for those who are *powerful*, implications for those who are *greedy*. There are also implications for those who are *lowly*, implications for those who are *hungry*, implications for those who are *poor*. The arrival of Jesus Christ in the world *changes* things. It has *political* implications. *Economic* implications. It throws some people down and raises others up. Those who are haughty and proud – *beware!* Those who abuse their power – *beware!* Those who exploit the poor – *beware!* *God’s justice is coming!* It’s a justice that brings joy and relief to those on the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. It’s a justice that brings misery and defeat to those who wield power in ways that do not accord with the justice of God. Mary lived during the days of Herod the Great, a wicked puppet king who governed Israel with an iron fist. Matthew tells us that Herod tried to *kill* baby Jesus, because of the *threat* he (rightly) perceived Jesus to be. The coming of Jesus Christ into the world is not a politically neutral event. Wicked kings, cruel tyrants, unjust governors of every kind – *Jesus is going to take them down*. Mary intuitively *knew* all this to be true. The gospel of Jesus Christ disrupts the balance of power. It *changes the world*.

Mary’s song ends with these words: “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.” Mary sensed that the coming of God’s Son into the world was going to be the culmination of promises that God had made to her people long ago. Long, *long* ago, some 1700 years earlier, when God had told a man named Abraham to leave his homeland in Mesopotamia and make a new home in a land called Canaan. God had said to Abraham, “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:3) Seventeen long centuries had passed, and that promise had never yet been fulfilled. *Now*, finally, it would be. The baby Mary was carrying would be the means through which “all the families of the earth” could receive the promised blessing of God. Seventeen centuries! That’s a long time to wait.

So Mary sings. Simple, young, peasant girl Mary, in a remote town of no significance whatsoever. She sings. She sings, with all her heart. She sings, and it resounds through the ages.

And we sing too. When we look forward with expectant longing for Christ to come, we sing. When we look at a world that is broken and we await Christ’s redemption, we sing. When we take note of the injustice and the poverty and the hunger that still exists in abundance, we sing. When we remember that God is *good*, we sing. When we realize just *how* great God truly is, we sing.

Let us sing of God’s might. Let us sing of God’s mercy. Let us sing of God’s glory. Let us sing!

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