

## **Mary's Song**

Trinity CRC, December 17, 2017 AM  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

**Luke 1:46-55**

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Friends in Christ,

On Sunday nights when my sermons are preached and the work of the week feels done, I move into rest mode. That's when my wife and kids would tell you that I sometimes get a little hyper. I might make up some crazy song or just engage someone in a dance. I might pester Patsy. She loves it when I tickle her! I don't know if you have that sort of thing. The pressure is off. The day is done. It's time to sing and maybe even dance!

There are all kinds of reasons you might break out in song. In my case, it's because the work is done and I can relax. But you might want to break into song when you propose and your girlfriend says Yes! You might want to sing when get offered that job you've been hoping for. Or when the economy picks up and the company that laid you off starts rehiring. Some college and university student have probably been singing with joy in recent days when they completed their exams. The instructors and professors might be equally delighted that their work is done for the semester.

When you get good news from the doctor after you've been struggling a long time with health issues, you want to sing! When you finally get to go on that long-awaited trip, you might break out in song. I get excited when I watch the news and see the end of a war somewhere. That usually results in large crowds of people spilling freely into the streets with song and dance. Some of you here are old enough to have lived through the end of World War II and know the joyful singing and dancing in the streets when that war ended! Such celebrations could go on for days.

Can you think of a time in your life when you were just bursting at the seams with excitement? Did you sing? And if so, was it a song of praise?

### **A Song of Praise**

In our text, Mary is bubbling over in song; she's a bit like a bottle of pop poured into a glass, fizzing up and running over the top. That's because, first of all, this is a praise song. It's an "I can hardly believe how blessed I am" song. It's a "can you believe this is happening to me?" song. She ecstatic while also humbled and uncertain of what the future will hold for her!

Really, Mary has no idea what she's getting herself into. Perhaps better put, she has no clue what God is getting her into. But that's what makes her such a beautiful teenager. She's not as focused on what this means for her as on what God has said to her. Unlike our sometimes skewed views of teenagers today, 15-or-so years-old Mary seems to understand that this is not about her. Her jubilant heart is focused on the Lord, first of all. Luke writes,

*Lk 1:46 And Mary said:*

*“My soul glorifies the Lord  
Lk 1:47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

This song is often called *The Magnificat* which comes from the first word of this song in the Latin translation. In English it would be *Magnify* as in magnify the Lord. That’s where Mary’s song begins. That’s where her heart is at.

And it’s safe to say she got that focus by following in the footsteps of her teachers. You see, Mary is a Jewish girl whose primary textbook for school is the Old Testament. Mary learned the stories of her ancestors, spelled out in her Bible. She knew about other women who had “miracle” babies. In fact, she was with one of them as she sang this song. She was rejoicing in person with Elizabeth, an older cousin, a barren woman who is now standing with her. And 6 months pregnant! Miraculous! But from her education in the Scriptures, Mary also knows about Sarah’s miraculous pregnancy at age 90 that gave birth to Isaac. There was Rachel whose womb was closed while her sister Leah’s was fruitful. Rachel cried out to God and he opened her womb, giving her two sons. There’s also the well-known story of Hannah the mother of Samuel. She was barren but God opened her womb as this woman of faith prayed for a child and promised the Lord that she would dedicate him to the service of the Lord.

Commentators remind us that Mary’s song is filled with lines from Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2. There are also quotes from the Psalms, from Job and other OT writings. That’s what happens, friends, when we put the Word of God into our hearts and the hearts of our children. When it comes time for heart-felt praise to pour out of our mouth, we’re going to use words that are familiar to us. And Mary’s song begins with praise to God from the writing she had learned. Praise is the right place to start when we get good news. Give praise to God.

And because Mary learned this way of living, she would know as well that when it comes to dealing with crisis or death, the more Scripture and praise songs we have hidden in our hearts, the more they will bubble up to comfort and strengthen us. Maybe you’ve heard this before, but when elderly people can no longer be reached with regular conversation, the songs they have hidden in their heart from childhood often come back to feed and nurture them. Not so long ago someone told me that his mother had not spoken a word in 3 or more years. Then one day they played some hymns from her childhood and she began to sing along. What was planted deep in her heart and mind as a child bore fruit in the darkest of times, just as it bore the fruit of praise in Mary’s most joyous time.

Young Mary finds herself visited by an angel who tells her she’s going to be the mother of the Messiah. Then she is shocked and affirmed in that calling by Elizabeth’s words and Elizabeth’s baby leaping in the womb upon her arrival. And then the song of praise gushes out. She magnifies, exalts, praises, and glorifies the Lord Almighty, her God and Saviour.

*“My soul glorifies the Lord  
Lk 1:47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ...  
Lk 1:49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name.*

A song of praise is what comes from a heart full of thankfulness to God and confidence in him!

## A Song of Hopefulness

The second thing about Mary's song is that it's a song of hopefulness. Mary and her people had been waiting thousands of years for the Messiah to arrive. They were living in expectation—at least when they were living well. The hopes and fears of the all the years were going to be met in this child she was carrying. So Mary is hopeful for herself when she says,

*Lk 1:48 for he (the Lord) has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.*

*From now on all generations will call me blessed,*

*Lk 1:49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—*

Young Mary is favoured by the Lord, chosen for a special task.

As a child of the covenant, a covenant extending back to Abraham, Mary and all Jews had a strong sense of corporate and historical identity. She was just one piece in God's masterplan of salvation. She was not greater than anyone else. All needed the Messiah. You and I need the Messiah. But she had an awesome calling from God. And she rightly acknowledges that the Mighty One has done this.

The point for her is that this Messiah-Son of hers is going to improve her life—by God's grace. She's hopeful for that. She will be a mother, a big honour for any Jewish woman. But she will also have the most honoured position of being the mother of the Messiah! She would hold an esteemed role for generations to come. She's humbled and hopeful for what this means for her.

But aside from personal hopefulness, she's particularly hopeful for the whole nation, for her people. The Messiah is coming! The long-awaited Messiah. This is not just a reason for a personal party. In her mind, this will be a national celebration. She believes the promises of her covenant God that her people are the ones through whom a Messiah will come for the whole world. In this way God's promise to Abraham is being fulfilled to make his ancestors as numerous as the stars in the sky. In her words of hopefulness, Mary recalls the previous poets and prophets and psalmists, remembering how God has done mighty deeds for his people in the past. Listen.

*Lk 1:51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.*

*Lk 1:52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.*

*Lk 1:53 He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.*

*Lk 1:54 He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful*

*Lk 1:55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
even as he said to our fathers.*

Those were all foretastes of the coming Messiah.

Mary had been taught to anticipate the long-awaited Messiah through whom God would bless Abraham's family. "But for that to happen," says author NT Wright, "the powers that kept the world in slavery had to be toppled. ...God would have to win a victory over the bullies, the power-brokers, the forces of evil which people like Mary and Elisabeth knew all too well..." After all, they "lived in the dark days of Herod the Great, whose casual brutality was backed up with the threat of Rome." It was not unlike living under the rule of Kim Jung Un in North Korea today. We are told that anyone who is the least bit of a threat to him and his power is eliminated. Well, the Messiah was the answer to this for Mary and her people. They recalled "the psalms and prophetic writings which spoke of mercy, hope, fulfilment, reversal, revolution, victory over evil, and of God coming to the rescue at last."

That's the hopefulness of this song of Mary—hopefulness for Mary herself, for her people, and ultimately for the whole world—even you and me. The Messiah is coming to defeat the evil powers of this world and to set the world right again. And that's the hopefulness that still characterizes us as God's people today. We know that Christ has come, death and sin are defeated. But we now await his return when the world will be put right once again. For that, we wait in faith.

### **A Song of Faith**

You see, friends, aside from this being a song of praise and hopefulness, above all else, this song of Mary is probably best described as a song of faith. Just think about it. This young woman didn't really have any idea what she had been recruited for. She was a naïve teenager in some ways. She longed for the day of the Messiah's arrival. But her ideas of the Messiah's coming contained visions of national pride. Israel would be the top of the totem pole, able to squash all enemies under the leadership of her Messiah-King. Mary and her contemporaries had ideas of a grand and glorious earthly kingdom to be brought into existence by the Messiah. That's what her faith was focused on.

But Mary would quickly learn that she needed faith to trust the Lord Almighty and his Messiah. Contemplating what Mary went through, it just struck me how absolutely amazing it must have been for Mary. Being visited by an angel, being told she'll be the mother of the Messiah, having that affirmed by her cousin Elizabeth who is also miraculously pregnant, being visited by shepherds who came with stories of seeing a host of angels announcing the birth of her Son. And that's just the start.

However, when Mary sings this song, she does not yet realize that her child will bring a lot of hardship to her life. Mary never experienced the physical freedom from Rome that she initially thought the Messiah would bring. This mother of God came to see that her child brought scorn from all sorts of worldly powers and even her own religious authorities. She had to flee with Jesus for their lives when Herod ordered the death of all infants in Bethlehem. She had to live with a lot of uncertainty for many years.

It all seemed pretty great at first. But soon she would discover the hardships of being the mother of the Messiah. As the song *Mary Did You Know* tells us: the little child would rule the nations—yes. But it would come at a great price: Did you know that this sleeping child you're holding is heaven's perfect Lamb? Jesus would give his life for us. And it would break Mary's mother-heart.

The trials for this dear mother began even before the birth of Jesus. She would not have a home where she could give birth to him. He would be born in a stable, the lowliest of places, a sign of his coming down—all the way down—to be one of us. To know our pains and struggles, from birth to death. Mary would feel the fear of losing her son at age 12, only to find him three days later in the temple courts. She would see him hated and opposed over and over again throughout his years of public ministry. She would watch as he was mocked, falsely accused, tortured and crucified on a cross.

So it took a lot of faith to keep believing and trusting in God's plan. But she knew God had a plan for this Messiah-child of hers. She had to live by faith and therefore trust the God who gave her the role of being the mother of the Messiah. With faith in God, she had to learn that she and all humanity needed a Saviour from sin more than a nation of earthly peace and power. In faith she submitted her national dreams to God's plans to save the world from sin.

Mary was given a very special role in the plan of God. No doubt about it. But Mary was no more special than you or me. She needed to learn to trust God in the storms that being the mother of Jesus brought to her. There was some glory in being the Christ-child's mother. But, oh, there was a lot of sorrow and struggle. And she would have had to learn—as we must—that Almighty God is faithful. We can know that our lives are redeemed by the Christ and that Jesus will ensure that one day everything will be made new, all our sorrows will be gone and we will live in complete joy. But in the meantime, we must learn to trust that all things are working together for our good, for God's good plan for us and the world, for God's glory and honour.

Congregation, following Jesus is not a ticket to a life of freedom from suffering or from opposition and struggle. In fact, it could be argued that it's the opposite. Following Jesus often results in struggle. But not a meaningless struggle. It's an invitation to a life where we learn more and more to trust the Lord. Every struggle I've had in life has helped me trust him more. You and I grow increasingly humble as we recognize that our Almighty, holy God is at work in our lives for good, whether it is completely clear to us what he's doing now or not.

John Piper once preached a sermon which included these words: "Not only is all your affliction momentary. Not only is all your affliction light in comparison to eternity and the glory there. But all of it is **TOTALLY** meaningful. Every millisecond of your pain..., every millisecond of your misery... is producing a peculiar glory.... I don't care if it was cancer or criticism; I don't care if it was slander or sickness, it's doing something. It wasn't meaningless. It's doing something. It's not meaningless. Of course, you can't see what it's doing. Don't look to what is seen. When your mom dies, when your kid dies, when you got cancer at 40, when a car careens into

the sidewalk and takes out (a loved one), don't say, "It's meaningless!" It's not. It's working for you an eternal weight of glory. Therefore, therefore, do not lose heart. But take these truths and day by day focus on them. Preach them to yourself. Every morning, get alone with God and preach his word into your mind until your heart sings with confidence that you are new and cared for."

Mary's song is a song of confidence, a song of faith because it speaks to something she didn't see coming. But she's confident in the Almighty to do his good work though the Messiah she is bearing. I believe young Mary benefited from getting the truth of Almighty God's sovereign care for her and the world into her mind and heart. She learned the truth at school. And it served her well in the joyous times of her life. But I'm almost certain that older Mary, after knowing what heartache bearing the Christ-child would bring her—yes, older Mary—could then sing of God's care with fuller confidence. Even more confidence than her younger self. Faith in God—in his meaningful plan for her life—gave her strength to live for God's glory and trust him more fully each day.

And for us today as well, we can sing with confidence perhaps like we do in the words of the song *In Christ Alone*: "Till he returns or calls me home, here in the power of Christ I'll stand." May our confidence in the Lord cause songs of faith in the Lord to bubble up from our hearts and give deeper meaning to our lives as well.