

Christmas in the Gospels *Luke's Song*

Luke 1:46-55

December 17, 2023

You simply cannot tell Luke's Christmas story without the music. Mark sends us into the weariness of wilderness where the voice of a prophet *cries* out. Matthew gathers the whole family and then *whispers* a promise into Joseph's ear. But Luke makes *melody* the method that moves his narrative along. There is Zechariah and Simeon. Elizabeth and the angels' chorus. Christmas is carried on the wings of song. And the most significant song of all belongs to Mary.

My soul magnifies the Lord.

Mary's *Magnificat* is a psalm of gratitude for the promise of a baby's birth, but this song is not a Christmas carol in the classic connotations. For starters, the lyrics come from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, words she first learned as a child. They recall another woman who received a parallel promise. Hannah, after learning that she would bear a son, sang what she could not speak. Her child, Samuel, signaled the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of a world gone astray and a people held captive. She sang of salvation, and so does Mary.

But do not be mistaken. This salvation, this redemption, is no otherworldly vision of a distant, imagined, ethereal future. It is a song of dissent set in the present, set down in a world stacked against the one who sings and countless others like her. She, Mary, is a peasant girl from a tiny village soon to be burdened by the blessing of bearing a baby of uncertain earthly origin. She has no resources to care for this child. Still, she praises God for honoring her.

Why? God's messenger has spoken to Mary. She has trusted his word. She has believed God's saving power and that this power is not just for souls but

for the bodies that hang in the balance when those with wealth and influence selfishly seek more of both. Listen to her words:

God fills the hungry not with hope but with food.
God gives them a place at the table.

In this way, the *Magnificat* of Mary is an overture to Luke's Gospel, setting the stage for the whole story. The searing sermons of John the Baptist. The beatitudes her own son will speak later. Mary begins the process of turning our expectations upside down, and she starts with the definition of blessing itself.

Blessing. We tend to use the word in close connection with material gain, unexpected or competitive advantage achieved. Blessed with our resources. Blessed with skills. Blessed by good luck, good health, a good life.

What about Mary? Mary knows what I struggle to understand. Receiving a blessing is not the same as getting a present. It is not about an easier path, a wish fulfilled, an ambition achieved, an advantage gained. It is about seeing God in what you cannot explain. It is about saying yes when God's way confounds you. Blessing is about being used for God's purpose, not about getting what I want.

And so, Mary sings of holy blessing. She preaches God's revolutionary truth to the world. She heralds hope to those who need it most and a word of warning for those who stand on top. Mary's words promise a program of apocalyptic reversal: the hungry are filled, and the affluent are emptied; the lowly are lifted high, and the mighty are brought down.

Now this may not seem like good news to those who are prosperous and powerful and filled already in the present. We who find ourselves with comfortable homes, and more than enough food and abundance of every kind. Perhaps you wonder, "Is there anything other than judgment for *us* in Mary's song?"

The answer arrives in the opening words: *My soul magnifies the Lord.*

Salvation comes to us when we do the same. All who are over-inflated must be saved from the sin of self-magnification. When we turn our eyes and our hearts away from ourselves and direct them toward God, we will receive mercy. Mercy waits for us too. When we say yes to God's way, we too can be saved. Listen. To be blessed is to be used for sacred purpose, and that possibility exists for all of us.

Mary's song insists that our salvation depends on the wellbeing of all God's precious children. We are directed to release our deadly stranglehold on money, possessions, and power, recognizing that these are all idols that will never fill our empty hearts with holy purpose. We are called, instead, to trust the abundant grace of God.

You see, the wealthy who are sent away empty are blessed because God comes to us when our hearts, minds, and hands are free, our future undeniably joined to the flourishing of all. *Mary's words create the world God intends us to build.* Mary's words create the world God intends us to build. Where those who cry out in pain are delivered. Where those who have nothing are given the kingdom.

Where those who serve are called blessed. Where the lowly are lifted and the hungry filled. Mary describes the work of Christmas.

And so, this is no ordinary birth announcement. No, it is the inauguration of a new kingdom, a kingdom that stands in contrast to every other earthly kingdom, past, present, and yet to be. Mary proclaims the reign of God, a reign which will not be based on violence or exploitation. Which will begin with the humble,

not the powerful. Which will trust the frailty of human hands to nurture and care for the God of the universe. Of course Mary *sings*. If God is for her, who will stand against her?

Mary's song is no solo. She invites us to experience the blessing of God, to raise our voice in psalms of gratitude. Imagine that God can do this again.

If you are feeling more anxious than expectant, if your heart is more worried than worshipful, if for you the spirit of the season seems elusive this year, then pause to ponder the possibility that God can use *you*. If the world seems destined to destruction, if the triumph of the wicked feels inevitable, and the permanence of polycrisis overwhelms you, listen again to the voice of Mary and trust that God can be born again into the brokenness.

Afterall, brokenness is the soundtrack of life these days. Around us, and often within us, hearts captive to despair desperately pray for release. As loved ones suffer from disease, as nations choose warfare and children suffer senseless violence or go to bed hungry in our own city, as creation groans under the weight of our collective disregard and division pulls us ever farther from the wisdom we seek, we wait. We wait. We sing of a God who just could not keep distant but came to live among us. We make room to receive the light that always comes when a long night gives way to the breaking dawn. We lift our heads, and we tune our ears for flicker and spark. We watch to the tips of our toes for the signs of joy that have been promised.

The whole world is waiting. For justice and nourishment. For peace and redemption. The whole world waits for mercy and, yes, for salvation. So while we wait, let us work. Lift your voice. Prepare your heart. But above all, find the courage to trust the promise of Mary's song. God will be born again in the brokenness...in us, through us. Yes, Mary knows—the world is about turn. Amen.