



What are you waiting for? *A Brand New Song*



Luke 1:39-56

December 12, 2021

A favorite Christmas story. It's the story of a seven-year-old boy who was given his first major role in the church Christmas pageant. He was to be the only angel who was given a speaking part, the one who first announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds watching over their flocks by night. For weeks the boy rehearsed the one line assigned to him. In the King James translation: "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy." In fact, the boy rehearsed the line so often, and with such theatrical gusto, that his whole family and anyone else within earshot for weeks learned that line as well. "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy."

The big night finally came. Christmas Eve arrived. Everyone was in place in the sanctuary. All the grandparents and the cousins and the extended family, visitors from out of town. The pews were packed with an eager audience. As the pageant began, the anticipation in the room was palpable. The dramatic high point of the first act of the play was to be the stirring announcement of the angel to the shepherds, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy." The boy stood center stage, adorned with coat hanger and glitter wings, halo awkwardly positioned above his head. Silence in the packed room. The spotlight hit him. And, he froze. The words would not come. Every relative and every neighbor shifted to the edge of their seats. They leaned forward, wanting desperately to say it for him. You could see his parents there in the front row mouthing the words, "Behold..." Still, the boy was silent. He could not recall the line. He tried, but the words simply wouldn't come. Until finally, in a moment of divine intervention and brilliant

innovation, he filled his lungs with breath and blurted out the words, "*I've got news for you!*"

I wonder if that's the way it happened for Mary. The messenger of God named Gabriel sent unannounced to a young girl in a small town called Nazareth with the shocking, world-altering, nearly unbelievable news that she would give birth to the Son of God, that she had been chosen to bring God's love into the world. *I've got news for you, Mary!*

News is what it is. Whatever else Advent might bring—hope and peace and joy and love—at the center of this story is news. Something we didn't know before we read it. Something we weren't aware of before we heard it. News. The words and encounters from this morning's two-part scripture reading are some of the most extraordinary moments in all of scripture, tailor-made for a children's pageant, filled with drama and suspense and powerful, memorable lines. And at the heart of it all is the kind of persistent and relentless joy that we so desperately need.

Yes, I said *joy*.

It is Mary's cousin Elizabeth who first speaks of joy. Luke tells us that she was filled with the Holy Spirit (that's one of Luke's favorite phrases in his Christmas story). Elizabeth filled with the Holy Spirit. The child that she is carrying, himself a miraculous gift of God, leaps for joy as Mary arrives at their hill country home. In response to Elizabeth's words, Mary opens her mouth in joyful praise.

Mary's poetic pronouncement is really a song. It's a song about what God will do, or better what God has

already done. The Church remembers it through the centuries by that opening phrase: the *Magnificat*. My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Having received the news, Mary sings a song of joy. Yes, I said *joy*.

Why? What in the world does Mary have to be joyful about? Gabriel's stunning news did not come with an instructional manual, toolkit, superpowers, or the many resources she lacks. Poor, pregnant, adolescent and unwed, the path ahead is more than a little daunting for Mary. At every turn, Luke insists on reminding us of the backdrop of this story. In the days of King Herod...a decree went out from Emperor Augustus...while Quirinius was governor of Syria. These were the powerful people, the powerful men, in Mary's day. They were the ones at the top of the ladder, and Mary was barely hanging on to the bottom rung. For starters, it was not a time of great joy for Jews living in the shadow of the Roman Empire, under the booted heel of Emperor Augustus. Even without the risks of isolation, judgment, and condemnation that her news might bring in her own community, all this rejoicing seems almost embarrassingly out of place.

Several weeks ago, I read a piece examining the falling birthrates in the United States. For seven years in a row, Americans have been having fewer children, and the number in 2020 dropped by a record eight percent. The piece thoughtfully combined statistical analysis with interviews that provided some context for the numbers. I thought one woman summed up the feelings of many when she said, "We're afraid. There are too many unknowns for us to feel comfortable bringing a child into the world at a time like this." At a time like this. Her words brought to mind Madeleine L'Engle's poem titled, "The Risk of Birth" written on Christmas Day in 1973:

*This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war & hate
And a comet slashing the sky to warn
That time runs out & the sun burns late.*

*That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honour & truth were trampled by scorn—
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.*

*When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by a comet the sky is torn—
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.*

I for one would understand if Mary's reaction had been more subdued. No time for a child to be born. Uncertainty and fear for the future were clearly as rational then as they are now. A time like this. No time for a child to be born. But no. Mary gives voice to a different kind of song, a song rooted in the sturdy promise of God.

Here's a confession. I've read this story every December for decades now, but something struck me this year for the very first time. I realized that I'd always imagined Mary's song as a spontaneous eruption of unrehearsed praise. In fact, I went back and looked at old sermons, something I caution most preachers against, and read my own words from previous years. I've said things like, "The words come mystically to her." But that's not true.

The truth is that Mary's song has very deep roots. The words shaped by another story of miraculous birth, way back in the Old Testament when a woman named Hannah was promised a son whom she would name Samuel—*God has heard*. Hannah's prayer was recorded in scripture, the scripture that Mary would have learned in Sunday school. And Hannah begins to sing, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God."

You see, Mary's brand-new song of joy is really her verse added to the unending hymn of God's people. And that matters. That matters because, while spontaneous moments of delight and euphoria will come and go, the kind of rejoicing that Mary offers us is patient, persistent, and defiant. It is the tenacious joy of a people who have come to trust that emperors and kingdoms will rise and fall, but the

power of God is without end and the grace of God is relentless. Mary sings that truth.

Yes, Mary's got news for us. Like Hannah's song, Mary's vision opens our eyes to what might be true if we allow it to be. Like the beatitudes that her infant son will speak as a young man, the *Magnificat* of Mary shifts our perspectives and overturns our expectations. The God who has looked with favor on Mary is the same God who will scatter the proud, humble the arrogant, lift the lowly, and fill the hungry. Mary chooses joy not because she is simpleminded and certainly not because joy is the easy path. She chooses joy because she has been given a vision of God's reign, rooted in what God has already done. She heard it from Grandmother Hannah. Mary's words are for the powerful and the powerless. *God's got news for you.*

And what about us? What do we have to be joyful about? Look, these are hard days. Our newsfeeds and email inboxes make this painfully obvious. So much exhaustion, cascading grief, resounding discord, strain. Joy, yes I said *joy*, feels tragically misplaced or embarrassingly simpleminded. Who in their right mind would be rejoicing right now?

Those who have been here before. Those who know the song by heart. Those who, with determination, trust the providence of God more than the prevailing pessimistic prognostication on repeat in the soundtrack of life these days. Those who are waiting with Mary for her vision to become reality and those who, like Mary, know deep in their hearts that such a day is surely coming, where all those who hurt will find healing. Where all those who cry out will be delivered. Where those who have nothing will be given the kingdom of God. Where those who are servants will be called blessed by all generations. Where those who are lowly will be lifted up. Where those who are hungry will be filled with the best things. Mary sees a day that is surely coming, and so

she sings her hope into existence: "The mighty one has done great things for me." She says it defiantly. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones. Beware, Emperor Augustus. God will lift up the lowly.

There is a basic truth that stands at the heart of the Advent season. It is this: No matter what you are waiting for, you cannot receive it unless you've made room for it in your life. When God's messenger came to Mary, there was a place in her heart. There was room in her imagination to receive the news. So if you are feeling more anxious than expectant this year, more worried than worshipful, if the spirit of the season seems elusive, then take a deep breath and make room for the possibility of joy. Yes, I said *joy*.

Mary remembered Hannah's song and found her rejoicing voice. In Mary's song we, too, can discover the gift of defiant joy for which we have been waiting. You see, joy needs no worldly permission. It is formed in the hearts of the faithful who wait for God's promised day.

Mary has news for you! Christmas is not, must not be, only something that happens *to us* or *for us*. God chooses to be *with us*. "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you." And we must choose to be with God. Christmas is not only the voice of the angel bringing good tidings of great joy. Christmas requires a response. Christmas comes in the voice of a brave woman who accepts the call of God to take a risk and bring new life into a broken world. It is the risk taken by all who hear the angel's voice and respond with defiant joy and bold faith, "Here am I." Amen.

ⁱ I've heard this story several times, most often by Rev. Dr. Bill Self, pastor of John's Creek Baptist Church.

ⁱⁱ Madeleine L'Engle, *The Weather of the Heart*. Shaw Books 2000. p. 47.