

December 3, 2023



One of my favorite parts of the Christmas season is the music. Once December 1 rolls around, I haul out those old Christmas records and CDs, and enjoy them all month. How about you? Show of hands: does anyone else here love Christmas music?

I think that Luke also must have loved music celebrating the arrival of Jesus on this earth. There are no fewer than 4 songs in the first two chapters of Luke: the song of Mary, the song of Zechariah, the song of the angels, and the song of Simeon. 4 songs. Four Sundays of Advent. Hmm. Sounds like a fit to me! So during these first 4 Sundays of December, we will be looking at the 4 songs in the book of Luke. And then on December 31<sup>st</sup>, Caitlin and Joel Rhodes-Karahadian will be leading worship, and Caitlin will be preaching.

Today, we will be listening to the song of Mary, and reflect on how it touches us in the midst of change. Hear now the word of God as it comes to us from Luke, Chapter 1, vv 39-56.

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

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup> for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name.  
<sup>50</sup> His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.  
<sup>51</sup> He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
<sup>52</sup> He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.  
<sup>53</sup> He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.  
<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful  
<sup>55</sup> to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
just as he promised our ancestors.”

<sup>56</sup> Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Here ends the reading of God’s Holy Word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

At this point in Mary’s life, she was young - probably about 14 or 15 years old, since she was betrothed but not yet married. She was poor; at the time Nazareth was a small agricultural village in Galilee, a few miles from the Roman city of Sepphoris. A respectable girl of her time and place was betrothed as soon as she was capable of bearing children; and the betrothal would be arranged by the families. Marriage took place after betrothal, at a time that worked well for the village. She probably considered herself fortunate to be betrothed to a carpenter rather than a farmer.

But. Then Gabriel came and told her that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her, and she would give birth to a son, whom she was to name Jesus. Mary replies to Gabriel, saying, “I am the Lord’s servant; may it be with me as you have said.” She doesn’t seem to have told her parents about what happened, or Joseph, or anyone else, about this astounding encounter with Gabriel. At least not right then. Instead, she hurries off to the hill country of Judea, which was about 4 days’ walk away, to go and see Elizabeth. That’s because Gabriel had given Mary a sign that what he’d said to her would in fact come true: he told her that Elizabeth, her relative, was pregnant even though she had been unable to conceive for many years. That wasn’t widely known, because Elizabeth went into seclusion when she got pregnant. She hadn’t seen anyone outside her immediate household for months – not until Mary showed up.

Elizabeth had said nothing. Mary had said nothing. Not until Mary greeted Elizabeth. And then they both gained their voices! Elizabeth, and the unborn John the Baptist, were filled with the Holy Spirit. John leaped, and Elizabeth spoke out! In a loud voice she returned Mary’s greeting, and then some! Speaking as a prophet, she confirmed what Gabriel had said: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord

should come to me?" The "mother of my Lord" – that was the Holy Spirit speaking through Elizabeth. How else could she possibly have known what had happened to Mary?

And the voice of Elizabeth awakened the voice of Mary. Up to this point, she has told no one what happened to her; she might not have been sure of it herself. But Gabriel told her that Elizabeth was the sign – and so she was. When Mary saw the pregnant Elizabeth and heard her loud words confirming what Gabriel had said, she knew then that what had happened was real. It wasn't a dream or a hallucination – it was real! She really had seen an angel, she really had heard him speak.

Then Mary also spoke, by the power of the Holy Spirit. This teenage peasant girl with no say about her future? She said yes to God's future for her, and the whole world changed as the result of her choice. The teenage girl with no voice in her village? She said yes to the voice God gave to her. So her words were the words of a prophet as she spoke the Song of Mary.

First, she praises God. And this was no quiet little "Praise be to you, O Lord." This was loud! She says, "My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name!" She is exultant! Even though this means that her whole life is going to change. Even though she doesn't know how her life is going to change. She trusts God anyway and praises him with every fiber of her being, lit on fire by the power of the Holy Spirit!

And then, she goes on to speak of what God has done and will do, for Israel and for the whole world. "His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds in his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.

It's clear that Jesus' coming means change in the world. His mother prophesied as much, and his mother was correct. Jesus did change his world two thousand years ago, through his teaching, his healings, his death and his resurrection. And yet there is still much that needs changing. We await his return now to change the whole world. We don't know how, we don't know when, but we do know that he will return and re-create all things. His first coming has shown us something of what his return will be like.

It's a bit ironic, isn't it? When we celebrate Christmas, we like to keep things the same every year. Like hauling out the same records every year and listening to the same music, for example! Or using the same tree ornaments year after year. Or eating the same kinds of cookies year after year. We like our Christmas traditions, and we don't want them to change.

And yet the first Christmas was all about change, wasn't it? Certainly, change to Elizabeth and Zechariah's life. Certainly, change to Mary and Joseph's life. Christmas was the beginning of change to Judea and Galilee, to Rome and its empire, to the lives of countless people who have gone

before us. It's like Mary said: Christmas is about scattering those who are proud in their inmost thoughts, and bringing down the rulers and lifting up the humble. Christmas is about turning things upside down – it was then, and still is.

This year, this Christmas, are things changing for you? Perhaps your skills or your health has changed and you have to change your life accordingly. My mother, for example, had beautiful handwriting, of which she was very proud. Every year she would send out about ten dozen Christmas cards, to my dad's business associates as well as to family and friends. Each card was elegantly handwritten. But there came a time when she could no longer control a pen, and had forgotten who these people were, anyway. When she could no longer write, she had to make changes in her life accordingly.

Or perhaps your job has changed, or your finances have changed, or your family situation has changed? Perhaps your car broke down, or your plumbing is leaking, or your friend is moving away? And it feels to you like you shouldn't be having these problems, especially not at Christmas, right? Why, every Hallmark movie on the planet assures us that any problem can be resolved in time for Christmas and everyone lives happily ever after, right?

Well, God didn't write those Hallmark scripts! If things have changed in your life, that's OK. Christmas isn't about keeping things the same. Christmas is about change. Christmas isn't about keeping the same unchanging traditions. Christmas is about change. Change that is a benefit and a blessing, but is also a disruption. After all, where would we be if Jesus had not come to dwell among us as one of us? He is the best blessing there ever was, right? And yet, his arrival caused some major disruption for his mother. Why would we expect anything less than disruption from time to time?

BECKON HARDY TO RETURN TO THE CHANCEL.

So if things are changing for you, in this Christmastide of 2023, perhaps you too can sing along with Mary. Perhaps you too can sing loud and exultant praise to God: the God who gives us voice, the God who remembers to be merciful, the God who fills the hungry with good things, the God who has done the astonishing thing of coming to us in person. Perhaps you too can see God at work in the midst of change. Perhaps you too can sing as Mary did, in praise to God. Let's sing!

(Song of Mary; and Great Are You, Lord)