

Date: December 6, 2020

Series: *The First Songs of Christmas*

Title: "Mary's Song"

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Scripture: Luke 1:46-55

For a while, back in the late '70's and early '80's I collected hymnals. I don't do it anymore because they take up too much bookshelf space, but I still have a few of my favorites.

- I have this leatherbound 1975 Baptist Hymnal. I enjoyed using it for about 15 years, until we came to Redland.
- I have this blue 1956 Edition of the Baptist Hymnal. It's the one I literally cut my teeth on the only hymnal we used when I was a kid.
- I have this 1940 Green edition, AKA: The Broadman Hymnal. It's one of my favorites because it includes a 4-part arrangement of the *Hallelujah Chorus* for congregation. Can you believe church congregations once sang the works of Handel in four-part harmony?

And I also still have my FAVORITE hymnal. It was published about 1,600 years ago, give or take. I've hidden many of its lyrics in my heart that I might not sin against God. Anyone want to guess which hymnal I am referring to? Right, the Bible, which is perhaps the world's OLDEST "hymnal." I call it a "hymnal" because there are at least 185 songs in the Bible; songs about battles, funeral songs, songs about the Red Sea parting---to name a few. Of course, the majority of those songs are in the book of Psalms, but the rest are scattered throughout the Bible and this Advent we are studying five of them---songs that were sung at Jesus' birth. So, pick up your "Christmas Hymnals" or your "Christmas hymnal book ap's" and turn to Luke 1 verse 26, as we study the song of MARY.

Now, one thing we need to remember is that these first Christmas songs that we are studying were very DIFFERENT from any other Jewish religious songs of their day. I mean, if you and I were to have gone to the temple for worship in the years just before Jesus' birth we would have heard mournful music. There would not have been any clapping, no smiles on the faces of worshipers. The melodies were cheerless; in fact I think they must have all been in minor keys to reflect the depressed attitude of the people. You see, in these days the Hebrew people had very little to be happy about. As I told you last week, instead of LEADING other nations to God, they had been led, RULED, by pagan nations for nearly six centuries. Plus due to their disobedience and idolatry, God had not spoken to them through His prophets for over four hundred years. And the music of this day reflected this gloomy chapter in the life of the nation of Israel.

But when Jesus came into their world, when God became flesh, music was REBORN. New life was breathed into worship music as these central characters of the Christmas story responded to the events surrounding Jesus' birth with songful "*tidings of great JOY for all people!*"

Okay, as we study Mary's song, we shift into the future a bit. Six months have passed since Gabriel shocked that old priest named Zechariah with the news of his imminent fatherhood. And this time, Gabriel's announcement is to a teenage girl named Mary. His next stop will be to her bewildered fiancé. This angel was racking up a lot of frequent flyer miles!

(1.) Let's take a few minutes to familiarize ourselves with the SETTING of this angelic announcement and the song it inspired.

A.) First let's look at the REGION.

Mary and Joseph lived in the northern province of Galilee. Have you ever wondered why would God choose this particular province as the place His Son would grow up and launch His plan to reach out to all mankind in sacrificial love? Why didn't He choose Judea, the population center of Israel? I mean, Galilee was out in the sticks so to speak.

Now, in the six months since Gabe met with Zechariah, Herod has died. His son, Herod Antipas is now on the throne. And the apple didn't fall far from the tree because like his dad, Antipas introduced even more Roman idolatry and barbarism into the life of this province. But this was nothing new for Galilee because even in Old Testament times it had

been overrun by pagan religion. This is why Isaiah 9:1 referred to Galilee as a place that God looked upon with contempt. Yet God chose Galilee over Judea. This doesn't seem to make sense from our human perspective.

B. And then, neither does is the TOWN.

God didn't choose Jerusalem, the heart of religious influence and life in the nation. Instead God chose Nazareth situated some 70 miles northeast of Jerusalem, a little po-dunk town just above the main caravan route between Jerusalem and Tyre and Sidon, on the northern coast of Israel. I've walked the streets of the ruins of Nazareth when I visited Israel but if you want to do so you don't have to travel across the Atlantic. The Museum of the Bible has an almost perfect replica of Nazareth! It's very well done.

Anyway, due to its location on the caravan route, Nazareth had many "inns" to serve the needs of the scores of travelers, Roman soldiers and merchants, who came through. I imagine these inns formed sort of a "red light district." Under their influence, immorality and corruption had become commonplace in the life of that little town. In short, it was not a good place to grow up and that was well-known. This is why Nathaniel said, "***Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?***" (John 1:46)

C. Finally, the PEOPLE God chose for this part of HIS-story are interesting.

Joseph was a descendant of King David; a carpenter, a working man. He was betrothed to another descendant of David, Mary, poor peasant girl between the ages of 12 and 14. Like her peers Mary was probably illiterate. Her knowledge of the Scriptures would have been limited to what she memorized at home and heard in the synagogue.

Now, to understand this most important of all stories, and the song that came from it, we must know what "betrothal" meant in this culture. It was very different from our "engagement." Let me explain.

- For the 1st century Jew, the betrothal period could last up to a year and during this time the bride and the groom were bound together legally--the only thing that could break that bond was divorce. You might remember, this is what Matthew's gospel says Joseph was going to do when he first discovered that his fiancé, Mary, was with child. He was going to "***divorce her quietly***" (Matthew 1:19) which doesn't make sense to us because they were not married, but that's the way they did things then. Of course, Joseph changed his mind after Gabriel visited him and explained.
- If Joseph had died during their engagement, Mary would have been his legal widow.
- As part of the betrothal agreement Mary's property now belonged to Joseph.
- And if Mary had been found to be unfaithful, it would have been considered adultery, a capital offence under Jewish law.

So, in many ways to them betrothal was more like our marriage, minus the physical part of that union. In his gospel, Matthew is careful to underscore this aspect of Mary and Joseph's betrothal. He said not only was Mary a virgin at the time of Jesus' conception but also that Mary and Joseph had no physical relations until after Jesus was born. Luke affirms this as well, at the time of Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph were still only betrothed. Their marriage wasn't completed. These two gospel writers emphasize this to remind us that Jesus' birth was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah which said, "***Behold a VIRGIN shall conceive.***" (Isaiah 7:14)

Now remember, Luke WAS a medical doctor and everything in his training would lead him to doubt such a story. To put it in writing would subject him to criticism by his colleagues. But having traced all things accurately, Luke was so convinced of its truth that he boldly and beautifully recorded his findings that Jesus was indeed virgin born!

(2.) Okay, that's the SETTING. Let's get back to the STORY.

Follow along in your Bibles as we look at Luke 1:26ff, verses that lead up to Mary's song of Christmas. Mary was alone somewhere, many believe she was drawing water from the town well, when suddenly Gabriel appeared and his first words to her were, "***Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you.***"

Now, Gabriel's angelic greeting here has often been misunderstood and mis-taught. I mean, this is the source of the saying, "***Hail Mary full of grace.***" But that's not what the Bible says. The Greek literally says, "***Grace, oh Graced One!***" Gabriel did not say "***Hail Mary who is full of grace...to bestow on others.***" No, a more accurate wording would be, "***Hail***

Mary who has BEEN GIVEN much grace.” In other words, Mary is not the dispenser of divine grace. God is! And she herself received His grace in that she had been chosen to be the mother of Him through whom God’s grace is extended to all people. Mary was a sinner just as much as you or me, just as desperate for God’s grace. And she knew this, for, in one of the first phrases of her Christmas song, she said, ***“...my spirit rejoices in God my SAVIOR.”*** (Luke 1:46)

Well, Mary’s response to this sudden angelic arrival was similar to that of Zechariah. For, she too was surprised and bewildered. Luke says she ***“wondered what such a greeting could mean.”*** (Luke 1:29) Mary may have been only 13 and illiterate but she knew that Angels didn’t just show up for no reason. Their coming was an uncommon thing and that meant that his message was an uncommon message. So, with some apprehension and fear, she “wondered” what was about to come next.

It seems to me that Gabriel sensed her fear because in verse 30 he said and this is a paraphrase, ***“Do not be afraid, Mary; God loves you dearly. You are going to be the mother of a Son, and you will call Him Jesus. He will be great and will be known as the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His forefather, David, and He will be King over the people of Jacob forever.”***

Mary’s reply, her first words to the angel were, ***“How can this be? I am a virgin.”*** (Luke 1:34)

And I want you to notice the difference in Mary’s response to the angel’s announcement from that of Zechariah’s disbelieving challenge. Remember? Zechariah basically said, ***“This can’t happen Gabriel...my wife is too old to have children.”*** but Mary said, ***“How can this happen?”*** In other words, she didn’t QUESTION that God could do this. She just wondered HOW it was going to come about.

And there is nothing wrong with that. God invites our honest questions. He urges us to “Ask. . . to SEEK.” God WANTS us to relate to Him in this way. In fact, I think He delights in answering our honest questions because in asking and waiting for His answer we FELLOWSHIP with God. We RELATE to Him and that is why we were created in the first place!

Well, Gabriel’s answer to Mary’s honest question is in verses 35-37. Look at it with me. He said, ***“The Holy Spirit will come upon you. Your child will be holy---the SON of God.”*** Now, there must have been a long pause between verses 37 and 38 as Mary considered her response. Not only was Mary so overwhelmed that she probably had to sit down, she must have also been torn between two conflicting thoughts as she considered the implications of Gabriel’s announcement.

On the plus side, like any Jewish woman of her day, she surely considered it an incredible honor to have been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah, the mother of Jesus. The name “Jesus” or “Y’shua” or “Joshua” – three different versions of the same name – well it was very popular in Mary’s day. This name means “God saves.” And many parents gave their sons this name in the hopeful expectation that he might be the long-awaited One, the Messiah, who would SAVE Israel from the Romans in the same way that Joshua SAVED them from the Canaanites.

So, on one hand, Mary surely was thrilled at this news. Think about it! She had been chosen from among all women. And her song reflects her joy. Look at verses 47 and following: ***“My spirit REJOICES in God my Savior...from now on all generations will call me blessed. for the Mighty One has done great things for me!”*** (Luke 1:47)

But on negative side, Mary knew that to accept this privilege could bring with it great personal pain and hardship. As I said, Joseph would have the legal right to divorce her. Her parents and friends would reject her. I mean for someone ***“highly favored”*** by God, she was about to be very ***“un-favored”*** by pretty much everyone in town. Saying, “YES” at this point would make her the topic of gossip and if she maintained her innocence Scot McKnight says, ***“She would have been taken to a public place (perhaps the gate to the city), her clothing would be torn, and her hair let down (which was how prostitutes at the time wore their hair). She would be left there to be mocked and open to public humiliation by passersby.”***

She could even be stoned to death when the Romans weren’t looking. Remember? The Jews didn’t have the right to execute people, which is why they brought Jesus to Pontius Pilate. My point is, Mary’s saying “YES” to God brought great risk and saying “yes” to God often does!

Well, with that in mind look now at Mary's faith-filled reply. She said, ***"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."*** (Luke 1:38) In other words, Mary said, ***"Here am I---USE ME LORD"*** a phrase that all Christians should say each and every day. With her response Mary showed her deep trust in God, she indicated that she believed nothing UNDER God's control could ever be OUT of control. And I imagine that if angels are capable of feeling amazement, that Gabriel felt it that day, amazement at the courage and humble devotion to God that he found in the life of this young teenage girl.

Well, to help Mary deal with any doubts or just the understandable shock of his news, Gabriel encouraged her to visit Elizabeth, her cousin, who, unknown to Mary, was 6 months pregnant.

Now, think how Mary felt as Gabriel flew off. Imagine her excitement as this news sank in! I mean, if you have ever been pregnant, the first thing you want to do after you hear from the doc is tell someone! You know, call your parents and family, send out a virtual announcement. And Mary knew that she was pregnant not with just any child but with the Messiah. God Himself was in her womb and she couldn't tell her parents or Joseph---not just yet. So, verse 39 says that she took Gabriel's advice, and I'm sure with her parents' permission, she made the four-day journey south, to a city in a hilly region of Judea, south of Jerusalem.

Verses 40 - 41 suggest that Mary's arrival in Zechariah and Elizabeth's home was unexpected, because she caught Elizabeth by surprise. And when she did, the six-month-old unborn baby boy in Elizabeth's womb gave his mom and extra hard kick. John was already doing the job God called him to do: announcing the arrival of the Messiah!

Okay, in verses 46-55 we find Mary's song. Tradition has entitled it ***"THE MAGNIFICAT"*** or ***"The Glorification of What God Has Done."*** Take your Bible and let's read its lyrics.

Luke 1:46-55

46 – And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord

47 – and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 – for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will called me blessed,

49 – for the Mighty One has done great things for me---Holy is His name.

50 – His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation.

51 – He has performed mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

52 – He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

53 – He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

54 – He has helped His servant Israel, remembering to be merciful

55 – to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as He said to our fathers."

You know, we Baptists are often critical of other Christians whom we say pay Mary TOO MUCH honor. And I would agree, many believers go too far in their praise of Mary to the point of worshiping her and praying to her. For example:

- Some have said Mary was born without a sin nature, free from sin, AKA: ***"Immaculate Conception."***
- Some have said she was perpetually a virgin, that she never had any other children. We know that's not true because the Bible talks about Jesus' half-brothers and sisters.
- Some say she never died but was taken directly to Heaven in bodily form where she is co-regent with Jesus obtaining the grace of salvation for all humanity.

Of course, none of these beliefs are Biblical, so I understand the criticism. The problem is, if we are to criticize ALL believers who err in their beliefs about Mary, we would have to include ourselves because we tend to err in the OTHER extreme in that we honor Mary too LIGHTLY.

Dr. Alexander White said, ***"We must give Mary her promised due, we must not allow ourselves to obtain a grudge against the mother of our Lord---because some have given her more than her due."***

Dr. White is right. This brave, Godly young girl, deserves our admiration! We need more Christians who courageously obey God as Mary did! In fact, I'd like us to use the lyrics to her song of Christmas to try and get us back on track when it comes to having a proper opinion of Mary by answering this question:

Why should all Christians revere Mary like we do the apostle Paul or Billy Graham or any great Christian?

1.) One reason to revere Mary is because she studied the right BOOK.

May wasn't like many people today who live their lives according to the most popular Ted Talk or the latest pop psychology book or the newest book on life-coaching. No, Mary's book was God's book. We know this because in the lyrics of her Christmas song there are at least 15 references to Old Testament Scriptures. Obviously, this young woman was a student of God's Word. And we must understand, this would have been difficult for Mary. You see, in those days printed Scriptures were a luxury, so peasants like Mary would not have had actual written copies. This means she would have had to memorize Old Testament Scriptures from what she heard in synagogue. And her song proves that she had done just that.

She not only knew them, she understood their Messianic implications. I mean, her song is not only Biblical, it is profoundly theological. Many critics see this and say the song is too good for Mary to have written, they say, Dr. Luke obviously wrote it. I don't buy that because like the rest of my favorite songbook, every word of her lyrics was inspired by God. As Peter puts it, ***"No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man---but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."*** (2nd Peter 1:20-21)

This would apply to young women like Mary as well! Again, Mary's LIFE BOOK was GOD'S BOOK. She could say with the Psalmist, ***"Oh God, how I love Your law. I meditate on it all day long."*** Psalm 119:97. Well, all disciples of Jesus should love the Word of God as Mary did because remember, the Bible wasn't just given to increase our knowledge but also to change our lives. The plain truth is we can't grow spiritually, we can't mature and become more like Jesus unless we love His Word in the same way that Mary did. And this leads to the second reason Mary provides a good mentor for Christians to emulate. You see, not only did Mary read the right book. . .

2.) She gave God the right ANSWER.

Have you ever given God the WRONG answer? Have you ever told God "No?" I have. I remember when God called me to serve His church that was my answer. And it was as if a loud buzzer went off in my head, like the one you hear when you get the wrong answer on Family Feud. I wrestled with that BUZZER a few days until I finally surrendered and said "YES."

Mary didn't make my mistake, she said YES right away. She gave God the right answer. You know many people these days love the Bible. They even agree with its teachings and hold them in high esteem, but that's not enough. We must follow Mary's example and take the next step by obeying God's will as expressed in His written Word. As James says, it's not enough to be HEARERS of the Word, like Mary, we must also be DOERS of it! I mean, basically she told old Gabriel, ***"Whatever God says, I will do."***

This past week at our Zoom staff meeting I noticed a cloth hanging off a shelf in Peggy's office. The cloth said, ***"The 12th Man."*** I asked Peggy to explain what that meant, and she shared the story about back in 1922 when her alma mater, the Texas A&M Aggies, were facing the top-ranked Centre College Praying Colonels on the gridiron in the Dixie Classic in Dallas. A member of the Aggie football team by the name of E. King Gill was up in the press box helping reporters identify players on the field below and what they saw wasn't pretty. The Aggies were plagued by injury after injury. With every play they had less players on the bench to call in. Then the coach, remembered Gill was up in the press box. So he waved Gill down and told him to suit up. Gill ran under the bleachers and put on the uniform of an injured player then he came back to the sideline and stood, ready for the coach's orders to play. He stood there the entire game. When the game ended, the Aggies won, one of the greatest upsets in college football history. And Gill remained standing, the only player left on the team's bench.

Gill's willingness to serve his team in 1922 has passed down from generation to generation of Aggies for more than nine decades, right down to the days Peggy was there, when the entire student section stands during every game, both football AND basketball, a symbol of the 12th Man on the team. I love that story because it shows the power of obedience, being willing like Mary, ready to give the right answer to God---YES---USE ME! We should all live our lives STANDING---ready to say YES if God calls!

And this leads to the third thing I admire about Mary. She loved the right Book; she gave God the right answer and finally,

3.) She had the right ATTITUDE.

I'm referring to Mary's humility. I mean she didn't think, *"I'm the first virgin ever to get pregnant. This can be BIG for me. We can get figurines and lawn statues sold. We can name football passes after me. Why we can even wind up with people seeing my face in a piece of toast."* No, Mary was humble. She knew that anything good or great that happened through her was not because of her but in spite of her. It was because of Jesus.

Look back at her song. In verse 50 she says that God's mercy is given to those who humbly ***"fear Him."*** In subsequent verses she sings, ***"God scatters the proud...brings down rulers...but has lifted up the humble."*** We should all always emulate Mary's humility.

In fact, God's selection of the setting---the region, the town, and the people of this part of HIS story: Galilee, Nazareth, Joseph and Mary, Zechariah and Elizabeth---well, it helps illustrate His reversal of human ideas about greatness and smallness, significance and insignificance. You see, it is not the spiritually proud, the socially mighty, nor the materially prosperous who have the last word in God's kingdom. Arrogance and power and wealth are totally out of place there. No, as Mary's song proclaims, God exalts those who are not great by the world's standards but rather those who hunger for God and realize how much they need Him in their lives. The fact is, in the Kingdom of God, HUMILITY is an essential. As St. Augustine puts it, *"For those who would learn God's ways, humility is the first thing, humility is the second, and humility is the third."* Think about it. A person can't even become a Christian until he or she humbly admits their need for God until in HUMILITY they confess their sin and ask for God's forgiveness. After we become Christians HUMILITY continues to be a necessity because God will not use us unless we humbly place our lives at His disposal the way Mary did. In Isaiah 66:2 God says, ***"This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at My Word."***

When we humble ourselves and make ourselves available to God we learn, as Mary did, that with God nothing is impossible! Please understand people, this is more than an angelic insertion. It is a positive reality!

Let us pray.