

## Songs of Christmas

### 1. *Mary's Song*

December 4, 2022

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Welcome to the first week of our new series, “The Songs of Christmas.” Over the next few weeks, we’re going to learn from the songs people sang around Jesus’ birth. They’re recorded in the book of Luke. Please turn with me in your Bible or your app to Luke 1.

I’m enjoying Christmas music now. I know stores start playing Christmas music around Halloween, but Linda and I have a self-imposed tradition that we will not play Christmas music until after Thanksgiving. That roughly lines up with the season of Advent in the Christian calendar and allows us to focus on giving thanks before the Christmas rush. For over 10 years, the first song we put on is a Latin jazz version of *Feliz Navidad*. I’m not sure how that tradition started but it’s a fun, upbeat song, so we turn it up loud. Linda usually starts decorating while it’s playing.

Christmas songs come in all varieties. Some are fun, others tug at the heart strings. Some are songs about Santa or reindeer and have nothing to do with the birth of Jesus. Others are Christmas carols which tell the story of Jesus’ birth and identity. The oldest Christmas carol of all is the one Mary sang when she was told that she would give birth to the son of God. It’s rather amazing to think that these stanzas sung 2,000 years ago by a teen-age girl in the back country of Israel became one of the most famous songs in history. It’s called The Magnificat, the Latin word for “magnifies” and starts with the words “My soul *magnifies* the Lord.” The *Magnificat* has been part of the Church’s liturgy since its earliest days and for centuries, members of religious orders have recited or sung these words on a daily basis. Recorded in Luke 1:46-56, it’s the longest passage spoken by a woman in the New Testament.

The Protestant Christian tradition doesn’t seem to know what to think about Mary. Our Catholic friends exalt Mary so highly that at times it seems to us that they are almost worshiping her; attributing traits to her that are not in the Bible. On the other hand, we Protestants often go in the other direction and ignore her or think of her as a quiet figure who faded to the background after Jesus was born. Whatever else Mary is, she is a model of discipleship – because she heard from God and did what he said. Here

she was, an unmarried teenage girl living in a village in a backwoods territory of Israel. She was engaged to be married to a local blue-collar worker. But then an angel told her that she was going to have a child by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth marks the spot where that happened.

Mary could have said, “Sorry, that doesn’t fit into my plans.” But she didn’t and instead she said yes. It’s hard for us to imagine just how earth-shaking this was for her. Apart from the fact she’d just seen an angel, his announcement rocked her world. She might have been young, but she knew that being pregnant before marriage threatened her with economic and social ruin and possibly her life. When she told her fiancé Joseph that she was still a virgin, but that an angel told her she was going to have a baby, Joseph didn’t start humming “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” He responded the way you or I would respond to that kind of news: he didn’t believe her. He assumed she cheated on him with another man and decided to end the engagement. Mary’s world was crashing in on her. She was being rejected and would face life as a single mother with no hope of support. So Mary left and went to see her cousin Elizabeth who was also pregnant with a very special child. An angel had appeared to Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah and announced that they were going to have a son who would be used by God in a special way. We call him “John the Baptist.”

Mary was finally with someone who understood; Elizabeth not only believed her but had had a similar experience herself! When Mary told other people an angel appeared and spoke to her, they thought she was lying or loony. But Elizabeth said, “Yep, an angel showed up at our place too.” Mary was going to have a child when there was no natural way she could; Elizabeth could relate because she was very old and no one ever expected her to have a baby. (By the way, that could put some pressure on other family members at reunions: “Over there is Mary, you know, she gave birth to Jesus, the son of God. And standing under that tree is her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. So, how is it going with you? Any kids?”) With Elizabeth, Mary was free from the stares, judgement and disapproval of others. She became emotional, bursting out in song: **Luke 1:46-47** “*My soul glorifies [magnifies] the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*” In spite of the danger and misunderstanding, Mary declared that she was blessed (vv. 48-49) What made Mary get so emotional that she broke out in song? For one thing, she felt greatly blessed by God.

## **God blesses the humble**

*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.*

Mary said, “Who, me”? *God is going to bless me to be the mother of his son?? How unlikely!* Mary had no power or influence. As a teen-aged girl other people made decisions for her; she couldn’t decide where she would live or who she would marry. But God told her she was going to be the mother of the Savior of the world? She was amazed. And when that reality sank in she sang, *“My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”* Mary knew the scriptures because her song sounds a lot like the song of Hannah found in 1 Samuel chapter 2 when she gave birth to the prophet Samuel. She was amazed God even saw her, let alone worked through her. Yet this is a pattern throughout scripture; God works through unlikely people. Ordinary people like a young shepherd named David and a wandering foreigner named Ruth and some fishermen in Galilee. God will work through you and me, too – if we let him. God will do great things for you and through you if you are open. That may seem hard to believe because we each know our weaknesses. I remember my last semester in seminary as I was preparing to be appointed as a pastor. I was excited but was also beginning to feel the weight of what I was about to take on. I was 25 years-old and had only been a church member for about 5 years. I made an appointment with my preaching professor and told him how I was feeling. I said, “Who am I to lead God’s people?” He looked at me and said, “None of us are worthy; it is just God’s grace. You’re going to be OK.” Don’t sideline yourself from what God wants to do through you by thinking, “Who am I that God would use me?” Don’t conclude that you aren’t famous enough, extroverted enough, talented enough or gifted enough. God works through regular people who are open to him. Then like Mary we can say, *“He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.”*

There are a few ways to stay in a humble state so that God can use us and bless us.

## **Don’t manage your image**

Most of us automatically manage our image. We don't post anything on social media that makes us look bad; we only put our highlights out there. When it's time to take a picture we strike a flattering pose so we don't look bad. We brush our teeth and comb our hair and check the mirror before we leave the house. But here's the rub; sometimes God calls us to do things that will make us look foolish to other people. Just think of Mary when the angel told her she would have a baby. Or Noah when God told him to build a boat when it wasn't even raining. Or Peter when he stepped out of a boat to try to walk on water. Fear of what others think keeps us from following God's prompts and stepping into his purposes for our lives. When we're concerned with our image, we won't share our faith story with someone who might think we're a religious fanatic. We won't try to serve in a new ministry because we might not do it perfectly. That's why it takes humility to serve God. The humble don't necessarily enjoy looking bad. But their top priority is walking in God's purposes for their life, not looking good. Humility isn't thinking less of yourself, it's thinking less *about* yourself. It's not thinking you're a terrible, no-talent person; humility is thinking more about others' good and God's glory than about yourself. Mary didn't like being the target of town gossip, but it was more important to her to do God's will than look good to others. And because of that, the Lord exalted Mary so that every generation calls her blessed.

Pride keeps us from experiencing God's abundant life. Are you afraid to look bad, so you won't tell anyone about the sin that chains you? Remember, you could be free. Why not look good to God rather than to others who will forget you. Some of us may be too proud to pray about the problem we are facing. Prayerlessness is rooted in pride; deep down we don't pray because we think, "I can handle it..." But even if you can, you miss out on seeing the power of God. If you are having trouble with the idea of looking foolish for God, just ask him to show you how much he loves you and how precious you are to him. Once we experience what God thinks of us we won't be paralyzed by what others think. Humility is necessary for being all God calls us to be. After all, we start out following Jesus through humility when we confess our sins and our need for a Savior. And we keep following Jesus when we say, "Your will be done." God does powerful things for the humble.

To stay humble enough for God to bless you, **let God rewrite your life story**

Mary was willing to let the Lord interrupt her plans. If she hadn't we never would have heard of her. Mary had planned to marry Joseph, but she was willing to let him go if her saying yes to God caused him to leave. I'm sure she had planned to deliver her baby at home, like her mother had with her relatives around her. But a government census changed that plan and she had her baby far from home in a stable, then put him in a feeding trough. That wasn't her original plan. But she said "yes" anyway. Humble people say "yes" when the Lord taps them, but pride demands, "My will be done." It's good to have goals and plans as long as we are willing to let the Lord change our course. We might have plans for a relaxing weekend, but then our neighbor has a health crisis and needs someone to watch the kids. Let God rewrite the story. You might have saved some money for next year's vacation but then your friend needs a new transmission. You sense God tapping you on your shoulder to help. What do you do? The humble say, "OK, Lord, "I'll follow your lead."

**Luke 1:50** *His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.*

Throughout the centuries, Mary's song has given hope to the oppressed. Bryan Wilkerson observes that there is something surprisingly subversive about Christmas.

Think about these classic TV Christmas specials:

- Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer is mocked by the other reindeer and left behind; then one foggy Christmas Eve, his red-nose comes to the rescue and he is the hero.
- Or take the kids down in Whoville. The Grinch thinks he's ruined their Christmas by stealing their stockings and gifts. But they turn the tables on him and wake up and sing anyway. Next thing you know, the Grinch is carving the roast beast.
- Or Charlie Brown walks right by the big, shiny Christmas trees and picks a puny, sickly little tree -- and gets roasted for it. But then that little tree gets a little love and care and becomes a prize winning tree.

Those specials pick up on the subversive nature of Jesus' mission. So does Mary's song. That's why it has not been a favorite on everyone's playlist. During the British rule of India, the *Magnificat* was prohibited from being sung in churches. In the 1980s, the government of Guatemala banned any public recitation of the words Mary sang because they decided that her words about God's preferential love for the poor was too dangerous and revolutionary. Mary's words were inspiring the Guatemalan

poor to believe that change was possible.<sup>1</sup> Someday that change will happen.

To stay humble **Trust that God will flip the script**

*<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.”*

That’s pretty revolutionary. I can see how rulers wouldn’t want to hear the poor masses singing about how God will bring them down but lift up the humble. It also sounds a lot like the sermon on the Mount that Jesus would preach a few decades later. So if you feel like you are unimportant because you are not powerful, don’t believe it. In the eyes of eternity, you are highly important. If you feel empty, keep trusting; God has not forgotten you. If you have a lot of money or influence, thank God and praise him and stay sensitive to what he calls you to do. Mary’s song reminds us that humility opens the door to God’s work in our lives.

This year, let’s have ourselves a humble, little Christmas.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Subversive Magnificat: What Mary expected the Messiah to be like*  
<https://enemylove.com/subversive-magnificat-mary-expected-messiah-to-be-like/>