

THE SONG OF MARY
Songs of Christmas
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Last Sunday and next Sunday and today I've been sharing with you from the gospel of Luke some of the songs of Christmas. Luke 1:46-55 is the Magnificat. It's named that because the first word in the Latin translation of the Bible which has been used in the Catholic church for centuries is the word Magnificat meaning "magnifies." "Magnifies my soul the Lord."

One person has said of this Magnificat that it is the most magnificent cry of joy that has ever issued from the human heart. Sometimes when we read scripture it is as though we read it with wooden lenses. We take a passage like the Magnificat, which is so filled with exaltation and beauty. If we don't take a moment to ponder, if we don't take a moment to attempt to place ourselves in the scene. If we don't take a moment to visualize the song, that portion of scripture becomes like so many words on a page. If we take time as we will this morning to sing Mary's song with her, we'll see how indeed it is the most magnificent cry of joy that's ever issued from the human heart.

God's people and God's person Mary that had waited and waited for a promise to come true and now as Mary comes to Elizabeth's home and as Elizabeth greets her as the mother of her Lord, Mary's joy is released in an exalted moment. Luke freeze-frames the action for us so we can catch and feel the joy.

We read Mary's song with that state of exultancy in mind. "My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior." As you analyze this song you see that it falls into two parts, two major themes or verses of action. Mary rejoices first over what God has done for her personally – verses 46-49. Then secondly she rejoices over what God has done for everybody – verses 50-55.

The very words she employs are very similar to another passage of scripture. In the Old Testament, 1 Samuel 2, you'll find the song of Hannah which she sings when she brings little Samuel to permanently give him over to the care of the house of God and the priest Eli. It is as though Mary has taken Hannah's song and adapted it for her own purposes. It struck me in looking at the similarity of phraseology and the flow of thought between these two songs, that it's very obvious Mary had already been pondering Hannah's song in her heart. She had memorized that song. She had thought deeply about it. When the moment came for her song to be released she simply took that which she knew from the scripture and freshly stated it as her own experience.

The very fact that Mary is giving a new arrangement to the song of Hannah shows she meditated on the word of God in her private life.

When you meditate and memorize the word of God in your own personal experience you will find it coming to you in fresh ways in the great moments of life. It may be a moment like Mary of exhilaration. Or it may be a moment when we pass through some deep difficulty and we need some consolation. But the advantage to treasuring up God's word is that it gives us an ability to express ourselves aright when God is at work in great ways in our life.

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The first part of Mary's song, she rejoices over two things God has done for her personally. First he has been mindful of her humble status as a servant. Verse 48. And also in v 48, secondly, he has done great things for her. It's a stunning thing that God would bring salvation through so humble a means as a peasant girl. Mary is right: it is marvelous that the Lord has done so wondrously with such a humble person.

If we are to grasp the profound meaning of Christmas we must realize that God could do anything he wants. If he could send his angel Gabriel to Mary, certainly he could send that angel or any angel or any company of angels to Augustus Caesar or to Harod or to whomever he wanted to. As Christians we know the secret joy that god can take over the world any time he wants. All the world rulers are simply straw men stick figures, cardboard characters. The real power in this world is God. He reigns forever and ever. Therefore when you come to see that he bypasses all the power centers, he sends his angel past Rome, past the high priest's house, past Herod's governor's palace into the humble home of a woman in Nazareth. And can anything good come out of Nazareth? Has anything good come out of it? He sends his angel there. Not because he doesn't have power to send the angel somewhere else. But because God knows that you do not gain love by impressing people with your power. You do not gain love by shoving people around and ordering them to do your business like so many pawns on a chess board.

If you seek to give love and to gain love then you must become vulnerable. You must become approachable. Love and faith is gained through vulnerability. Power is not the path to love. If Jesus had not been sent we can still know that God is great. But we wouldn't know that God is love unless Jesus had been sent. So the God who can do anything he wants and reveal himself to whomever he wants appeals and appears to his humble servant Mary. She is struck by that as are we. The Lord is mindful of her humble estate.

Mary's second cause for personal praise is that God has done great things for her. He's done such great things for her in fact that all future generations will call her blessed.

I think that humble Mary would be embarrassed "all generations shall call her blessed" have been misconstrued over the centuries. We understand why they became misconstrued. During the Middle Ages to the common man God was such a remote person. Jesus was always emaciated and on the cross. Mary just seemed to be the only person that people could identify with and love. God far up, Jesus dying and helpless. But Mary, the intercessor... Mary the one that was approachable. Mary, the one who loved.

But when we get Jesus off the cross and have Jesus in his rightful place as Lord of the universe then Mary has a chance to be in her rightful place as well. To be nothing more and nothing less than the mother of Jesus, the blessed one who above all women has been shown favor. Not that she has been given power to bestow favor. Not that she has in being given grace, been given the authority to confer grace. But rather she is the recipient of grace not it's dispenser. She is the gainer of favor not the giver of favor. That is what she was addressed as by the angel.

It's a humbling thing to realize that even as Mary was blessed by God, so also may we be blessed by God. One day a woman called out to Jesus from amidst a crowd of people, "'Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you,' and Jesus replied, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it.'" God blesses those still who, like Mary, will hear his word and say, "Let it be unto me according as to thy word."

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May was given a special privilege in being the mother of Jesus. You'll find that whenever a special privilege or revelation is given to someone then it carries a very special responsibility. Barclay the famous New Testament commentator says "To be chosen by God so often means at one and the same time a crown of joy and a cross of sorrow." The piercing truth is God does not choose a person for ease and comfort and selfish joy. But for a great task that will take all the head and heart and hand can bring to it. God chooses a person in order to use that person.

I've gone through the gospels and Acts, the historical part of the New Testament, in trying to identify all of those special occasions when God reveals himself in a supernatural way to someone. Maybe through a vision, or appearance such as Paul had on the road to Damascus, perhaps through an angelic manifestation such as here with Mary. But I find that whenever God reveals himself in that kind of a way to people without exception those persons pay a price, suffer a cost, that others who do not have that exalted revelation are exempt from. It's as though God knows the great trial that they are going to go through and in order to give them advance strength for the trial, gives them a revelation so strong that in their doubting moments it will hold them steady.

I say that to all of you who want God to speak to you directly as I have for all of my life. I say that to all of you who want an angel to come to you, all of you who want some special spiritual experience that will lift you out of your body in an approved way. When God gives those experiences he doesn't give them in order to titillate people with some sort of spiritual feeling. He gives those kinds of spiritual experiences to strengthen us for the long haul of costly service.

I went through what difficulty as laid upon Mary. I found seven difficult things laid upon her as the mother of Jesus which make it understandable why she was given such special revelation.

The risk of losing Joseph. Her betrothal to him was placed in jeopardy by the action of the Lord.

The ruin of reputation. No doubt many of her contemporaries as well as many modern people laughed at the idea of a virgin giving birth to a child.

There is the reality of vulnerability. Because of that which had happened to her she must make a very difficult trip on a donkey in the ninth month of her pregnancy and give birth in a cave where animals are kept.

They run from imminent danger. The wrath of Herod. The return to responsibility. Upon coming back to Nazareth she took on mothering duties without any of the special privileges of finance or honor that could have been accorded to one given so high a responsibility.

The wreath of misunderstanding. How difficult it was for Mary to understand why Jesus acted as he did in his earthly ministry. She even came once to take him home because some of her family members were saying, "He is out of his mind."

The remorse of crucifixion. Mary's grief at the cross went far beyond the natural sorrow a mother would feel in such a moment as that. It called into doubt everything that had been shared with her from the beginning.

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Great difficulties. But a high privilege of revelation. I'm sure when you see Mary in heaven and you ask her, If you had it to do all over again, would you do it? It doesn't take much imagination to know what Mary's response would be.

Somehow in our own life difficulties if we could keep that in focus – and Christmas for many people can be a very difficult time. It can be a time of remembering absent places. It can be a time perhaps of looking back to some unpleasant Christmases. Maybe some hard memories. But as Christians we know that when it's all added up on the scale it will be worth it all when we see Jesus.

God balances things out in his time and in his way. Mary found that the compensating balance of glory and joy ultimately outweighed all the grief and the sorrow of heart. Mary in the first part of her song, addresses the Lord in four different titles. I think that itself is also very instructive about her spiritual condition and is a model for us about our own relationship to the Lord God to call him these four things.

She called him first of all "Lord." "My soul praises the Lord!" That word "Lord" in the Hebrew was the sacred name of God – Yahweh or Jehovah. The meaning of that day is somewhat bound up in mystery. God gave his name Yahweh, Jehovah, to Moses Exodus 3:14, and the name we know is in verb form. It means either "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be." It simply carries with it the understanding that God has the right to define himself. No one else can within the box of their own mental concept say who God is. God reserves the privilege of being God and defining to all who he will be.

Mary, that's her first word to the Lord and it must be ours as well. He can never be our Lord if we insist on making him what we want him to be. Some people walk away from serving God because he has not come through in the way that we have outlined that he should. We cannot put any constrictors upon God. Nor insist that he be something that we want him to be. He insists on revealing himself to us as "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be."

Part of the Christian's understanding of relationship with God is God's freedom in our life to be Lord. And to call him Lord no matter what may be happening to us.

He is God my Savior. Mary's acceptance of this phrase acknowledged her need for salvation. God can never be our Savior unless we realize we have need for salvation. That we are lost in the grip of sin and death and the devil.

God is the mighty one to Mary and he must be the mighty one to us. The Greek word means "one who is able." That is one who is strong enough to get done what he intends to do. The God of the possible. Gabriel had said, "with God nothing shall be impossible." Therefore he is the God of the possible.

Mary knew this about God. The mighty one. Not the mighty one in the sense of a karate expert who comes crashing through a China shop and sends everything every way. But the God who always gets his will done. Who always gets his purposes done. Who like a glacier will move on until everything has been carried in his path.

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And holy is his name, Mary says of him. In his being and character she knows no one else is like God. Holy means to be set apart. To be weighted with glory and to be flawless and of sterling character. No one is like God. Blessed be his name.

This God has acted personally for Mary. And Mary knows that not only has God acted personally for her but he has acted for us all. That's the focus of verses 50-55. In this great hymn of praise for what God has done for all Mary gives seven verbs that describe God's action. They're all in the *eros* tense – the past tense. In trying to reflect the translation sometimes you compromise and put something in English that sounds good but it may be more precise if it were stated more exactly.

For instance the English says "He has performed mighty deeds with his arm." That progressive past tense can signify a continuing kind of action that went on over a period of time. But the *eros* past tense denotes action that was taken and complete. He performed. He did it and it's been done.

Seven verbs describe God's great action. "Performed mighty deeds with his arm." In the Old Testament God's power could be in his finger or in his hand. But his greatest power was in his arm. By his arm he led the people of God out of Egypt. By his strong arm he has given us Jesus. He performed mighty deeds with his arm. He scattered the proud. He brought down rulers. He lifted up the humbled. He filled the hungry with good things. He sent them right away empty. He helped his servant Israel.

Barclay says these phrases all put together show us how revolutionary God is. How he brings revolution within the human stream. Barclay notes three revolutions. I think these are excellent in stating what Mary has given us.

God brings through Jesus first of all moral revolution. The proud are brought down. That is to say, the person who looks at life and says, "I don't need God. I can make it on my own. I'll make up my own rule." The proud are brought down. God turns over the morals of this world. He turns over the moral system of hedonism, any way of looking at life that starts from a base of "I am self sufficient. I am the captain of my ship and the master of my fate." He brings down the proud and tumbles them from their self-made thrones.

Jesus brings social revolution. God casts down the proud and exalts the humble. Barclay tells the story of the middle age scholar who was a wandering scholar, had a vow of poverty. He fell ill in one particular town and finally was taken to a hospital where he could be cared for by doctors. A place for indigents, persons without money. He heard the doctors discoursing about his case in Latin. They assumed him to be some poor ignorant peasant and thought they could best discuss his case in the Latin tongue. They said, "What shall we do with this fellow? He's a poor worthless beggar. Let's use his body for medical experiments." Whereupon the scholar said in Latin to them "Call no man worthless for whom Christ died."

That's the social revolution that Jesus brings into life. Every life is valuable. That's why as Christians we're not only concerned with our own world and our family and our church and our own community. We have a heartbeat for the whole world. The idea of the Red Cross did not originate under Islam. Islam presses stress upon mercy but it's far short of the whole understanding of grace that Christ brought. Compassion and love for the last, the least, the lost

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flows from the heart of a caring, loving God who overthrows things socially and says every man and woman is valuable of inestimable worth. How different for many places in this world and the terrible treatment that is handed out to people.

Third, God brings an economic revolution. He fills the hungry and he sends the rich away empty. When the word “rich” is used in scripture in a derogatory sense it inevitable means someone who doesn’t see any human need to meet. Therefore it’s just one more thing to add to their collection. Jesus brings economic revolutions. He fills the hungry and sends the rich empty away. Here is God’s rebuttal to a society that says, Get, get, get. Instead of also saying Give. Share.

How will God’s revolution come?

I’ve had occasion in 1983 to travel in both China and Mexico. They’re but symptoms of the great mainstream of the population of this world that live in third world under developed countries, under dictatorships, totalitarian regimes of one kind or another. Most of this world is not free to bring about any kind of change. The masses are helpless.

How does God’s revolution come? What’s the solution to the need socially, economically, morally? This has perplexed those working in under developed countries. The whole theology of liberation is basically taking up a Christian call to arms and saying, The only way we can right injustice is ourselves taking the gun and in the name of God throwing out the strong and bringing in the poor. Is this the answer? Violent overthrow? Armed action? What is God’s way of revolution?

God’s way is to give us Jesus. To begin the moral, the spiritual, the economic, the social revolution within every human life. To take changed individuals and to seed them in this world as his agents for change and good news.

Jesus’ moral, social, political and economic revolution must take in our heart. If we haven’t learned this from Marxism we will never learn it. Marxism can try to change society but you can never change society unless you change the heart. The heart will always be selfish, greedy and inquisitive. Jesus reaches in to change the heart and brings his change through a revolution from the inside out.

We speak of Jesus not only as our Savior but as a world ruler. I think sometimes our view of Jesus is way too small. We need to say periodically, the baby grew up! It’s wonderful at Christmas but we need to remember the baby grew up. He’s the Lord of lords and the King of kings. The Master of the whole universe and all the world leaders. Won’t that be a great day when they all stand before him and bow the knee.

We have noted that all these seven major verbs from verses 50-55 are in the *eros*, describing past tense action. Mary in her song is profoundly aware that God has acted in history, the history of her people. The history of Israel. But is that all she is saying here? Is all God’s activity in the past? No. She’s saying these things too about what God will do with the birth of her Son, Jesus. Many times when a person spoke prophetically about a future event they would use a past tense verb to describe an action that was yet to take place. Sometime the prophets in thinking of the

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future would use the past tense. Why? Because when God revealed what is going to happen, it's so certain of happening you can already treat it as having been done.

That's exactly what Mary does here in her song. She looks at the revolution coming through her Son Jesus, how God has always acted in the past. But he has not quit acting. He is going to bring this through her Son. Through Jesus. So she can describe that which is yet to come as though it had already happened.

That's why, by the way, we can say as Christians "I'm saved." In actual fact there's probably a lot of us yet to be saved. I look at conversion as both an act and a process. I was converted but there are many parts of me that have been converted more over the years. Some of me needs to be yet more converted. Some of me needs to be yet more saved. My final salvation will not be accomplished until my body is incorporated in the benefits of Christ's resurrection either through translation when he comes or through resurrection when he returns. But I'm already saved. Past tense. Why? It's a future event. Past tense because it's already been assured by God.

Mary begins her song in the present tense: my soul is magnifying the Lord. The NIV says, "Making large the Lord." That's the thing we need to do when we seem small and insignificant not mighty. We need to magnify the Lord and make him great.

My soul is magnifying the Lord. The neat thing about the present tense when its stated is that it can describe action that is continuing. My soul *is* magnifying the Lord. My spirit *is* rejoicing in God my Savior. It can describe action that is continuing even to the point of being a habit. I'm certain that Mary said these kinds of things on more than one occasion. My soul is praising the Lord.

I was struck with these words. I wonder if at this Christmas, that describes you and me. Is your soul praising the Lord? Is your spirit rejoicing in God my Savior?

Mary had very little to praise God for that first Christmas. She was away from family. Some of you may be separated from family either by distance or by death. Mary was without any Christ tree, certainly any Christmas decorations. She had the original decorations – the stable, the animals. Mary was without any gifts until the wise men come some months afterwards.

What did she have that first Christmas? Jesus. If at Christmas, if you don't have anything else, if you have Jesus, your soul can magnify the Lord and your spirit can rejoice in God, your Savior.

Our Father, we thank you again for the word of the Lord and the song of Mary. May we look at our own lives through the window of light that it provides for us. Surely we can reflect upon that which you have done for us personally. We pause to think back in our prayer over the days and months of this past year. And recall in this moment the special ways you've met with us. Thank you, Lord, for each of those moments. Thank you that you are doing something for us all. Maybe some are here today and are fighting with things that have happened. And would if they could have done them a different way. Would have wished you had done them a different way. That's part of our humanity, part of our questioning, part of our doubting. You understand that. But Lord, on behalf of brothers and sisters I would release a prayer to you. That you would be Yahweh in our hearts. To be

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whom you will be. To do what you will do. And that in the gracious acceptance of life with all of its risks and pain we might move on to find your greater glory and the greater good that can happen to us in every moment of life. Lord, we pray ourselves to always sing Mary's song. The greatest song that's ever been released from the human heart. Let our heart be filled with rejoicing over the changes you have brought and are bringing yet. We thank you. In the Lord's name. Amen.