



MARY'S SONG
Luke 1:39-56

Have you ever had one of those special moments in life's journey – when you were so excited that you simply burst forth in song? Imagine for just a moment that you have received the greatest news of your life. Something so stunning – something beyond your fondest dreams. You are compelled to express it in song. Something so deep inside of you rises up to give voice to the experience.

Mary, a quiet and gentle Jewish maiden – was already preparing for her special day – her wedding day. Our Jewish friends really knew how to have and celebrate this special day. Preparations were in the works.

However, one day – perhaps while she was sweeping the floor or grinding grain into flour for that night's dinner bread – an angel of the Lord appeared to her. She lived in a small, out-of-the-way village called Nazareth. Nazareth was not known for its political or religious importance. She was all of 12 years of age.

Her family had arranged with another family in town for her to marry a slightly older Jewish carpenter. It was in this setting that a supernatural and downright stunning announcement took place – that stirred Mary's soul and spirit.

However, the angel's presence was not nearly as stunning or shocking as the message he came to announce. After calming her down – he laid out this great plan that almighty God was about to unfold into human history. She was to be part of it.

Being raised in the strict religious traditions of her parents, she first thought after everyday matters – before the eternal ones. She was puzzled – even perplexed. How could she – a virgin – give birth? God's Spirit - which spoke creation into being – would hover over her womb and bring forth life.

This way her body would be the vessel through which God would enter the world in flesh. Therefore, the child's origins would be of God and holy. The child would be fully human and fully divine.

Then the angel drops another piece of news. Her older Cousin Elizabeth – who had been barren for years – was already with child. It was a sign for her.

Now we don't know how long Mary pondered or reflected upon this announcement. When the angel left Mary was off to see Elizabeth. However, before she left to see Elizabeth she declared before the Arch Angel Gabriel, **"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."**

Among a biblically informed people – the word 'servant' has always been our given identity – not celebrity. God does not serve us. God is a good and merciful Master – but God does not serve us. God loves us – which is the greatest gift of all. God does invite us to be a participant in his glorious work of redemption. Mary sees herself as a servant of the Lord.

People who believe that the Bible is the infallible word of God and in absolute truth are in the minority in our modern world. However, it was the same in Mary's time as well. Mary's family is part of the faithful remnant of the people of God. They are faithful to the covenant that God established with Abraham. Mary did not have Ph.D. in theology – but was faithful and obedient to the truth she had learned at the synagogue. Faithfulness to God's word and truth has a power and credentialing all its own. God – and not human authorities – is the final and ultimate authority for Mary. That is what was magnified in Mary's life and song.

One of the 30 life principles that Dr. Charles Stanley teaches is this truth: "Obey God and leave all the consequences to him." **This Mary does.**

It is not easy to push against the tide of human reasoning – but Mary does. As the late spiritual writer Madeline L'Engle writes:

**"This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
There'd have been no room for the child."**

Mary's heart belongs to God – therefore she yields and surrenders to this great claim upon her life.

Our lesson today picks up the sacred conversation between Mary and Elizabeth in a town about 4 or 5 days travel away from Nazareth. The exchange between the two pregnant women is a precious one.

It is through the meeting of these mothers-to-be in **verses 39-45** that John the Baptist and Jesus actually meet – even though they are still in the womb. This event erases the curse of Esau and Jacob who battle for supremacy within a mother's womb. In the womb, John rejoices and leaps at the superior role given to Jesus. Even then John knows he is to prepare the way. He must decrease and Jesus increase. So, even before his birth John leaps for joy about the ministry Jesus will fulfill. He has the privilege to prepare the way. Never minimize his role in the purpose of God.

Now, when it comes to a right biblical understanding about the Virgin Mary – there are 2 extremes we wrestle with. Our Roman Catholic friends and some Anglicans friends elevate her position far too high – while most Protestants woefully ignore her.

In **verse 42** it clearly teaches us the Mary is deeply blessed or ‘graced’ among women – not ‘above’ them. Once again we must never minimize her role in God’s great plan – but as we continue we will clearly see that Mary magnifies the Lord God – not herself. Mary rejoices in the saving action of God on her behalf – not in herself. She is a model for discipleship, but never to be worshiped or exalted. That is given only to the triune God.

So now with reverence we come to **Mary’s Song** beginning in **verse 46**. Mary – in a prayerful attitude and spirit – offers these inspired words in response to the blessing given by her older cousin Elizabeth, who is 6 months pregnant with John. They are both filled with the Holy Spirit’s joy.

Mary simply lifts her soul and voice in a song of praise to a mighty and awesome God. Mary’s response has captured the worship and reverence of artists, musicians, and poets for centuries. While theologians debate if Mary could ever write or speak such words – the artists and musicians simply enter the story and are captured by its truth and beauty.

Scholars and theological critics have often shared that Mary – an illiterate teenager – would not have been able to express such thoughts. While it is true that a Jewish woman would not have been allowed or able to read the scrolls at the weekly synagogue – that did not prevent them from hearing and responding to them. Two books of the Old Testament are named after women – Ruth and Esther. The Jewish culture – like most cultures of that time – was an oral culture. So truth was available for all to hear and learn. Mary had heard the story of the prayer of Hannah in I Samuel many times. Mary knew her scripture quite well.

Mary’s song or response is filled at least 7 times with quotes or words from the Psalms – which were the hymns of Israel. You will not go wrong singing or praying the Psalms. Mary did one better than reading the scriptures – she listens and submits herself to their truth and wisdom. We must never forget that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom.

One of our members last Sunday heard Bishop Willimon preach at the National Cathedral in Washington, D. C. When he taught at Duke Chapel – a young, vibrant, intelligent student shared with him he had trouble believing in the virgin birth. So, he asked then Dr. Willimon was it important to believe in the virgin birth. He said, “Yes. We ask you to believe in the virginal conception of Jesus, and if we can get you to swallow that without choking, then there’s no telling what else we can get you to believe. Come back next week and we’ll try to convince you that the poor are royalty – and the rich are in big trouble, and that God – not nations – rules the world. Yes, we start you out with something fairly small, like the virgin birth, then work you to even more

outrageous assertions.” That is exactly what is happening in our lesson today in **verses 51-56**.

When Dr. William Temple was the Archbishop of Canterbury – he warned his missionaries and priests never to read the portion of sacred scripture known as the Magnificat in public. Mary’s thoughts were truly revolutionary – and people might rise up against the British Empire.

As I shared with my Sunday School class last week, the Roman Empire was at the height of its power and influence. It indeed was one of the great empires of history. All around the landscape of Mary and Elizabeth was the power of the Roman Empire. There were the temples and palaces built to Herod and the gods – beautiful fountains and roads connecting to Rome in every direction – and God ignored it all. A newer and greater kingdom was being ushered into history.

A revolution not connected to chariots and Caesars – to military might and political power that would overtake Roman and every other would-be empire thereafter. God starts the revolution with an older barren woman – and a young teenager from Nazareth. Mary and Elizabeth might have been low on the influence ladder of the world – but both were highly valued and graced by God.

Today only a few crumbling statues and broken columns of once great temples remain as the visible evidence of this once mighty empire. However, the baby born of Mary by the work of the Holy Spirit is the hinge and door of all history. **Yes**, it was the child – and not Rome – that changed our world. He did so by changing the hearts of millions upon millions. I have often shared with you that Jesus Christ was and is the greatest revolutionary the world has ever known.

The late Dr. George Buttrick once wrote, “If religion (faith) does not begin with the individual it never begins – but if it ends with the individual – it ends.” Our lives always have this vertical and horizontal response to God.

Faith found its way into Mary’s heart – and did not stop there. She offered herself in service to God – and her witness still continues to this day. Faith for Mary was more than a cultural nicety. It was more than intellectual or head knowledge. It was more than a warm fuzzy. It was a belief with trust. It was a faith that was alive and working. It was a faith that allowed her to move beyond her comfort zone – to trust God.

Martin Luther once wrote that he believed there were three miracles at work in the virgin birth drama. First is the obvious – a virgin conceiving. Second, God becoming a human being. Thirdly, Mary believing in God to do the impossible. Luther further shares that the greatest miracle was Mary believing – because it made the other 2 miracles possible.

May Mary’s song be our song as well. May our souls magnify the Lord as well.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

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The following resources were used in the crafting of this gospel message:

1. Darrell L. Bock, **THE NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY**, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, pages 63-73.
2. Eugene H. Peterson, **CHRIST PLAYS IN TEN THOUSAND PLACES**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2005.
3. Eugene H. Peterson, **THE JESUS WAY**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007.
4. Eugene H. Peterson, **THE MESSAGE: Conversations with its translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007.
5. Warren W. Wiersbe, **THE BIBLE EXPOSITION COMMENTARY, volume 1, Matthew – Galatians**, Victor books, 1989.